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# **Building partnerships with families using Web 2.0 technologies.**

## **A case study of using new technologies to build partnerships with families**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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The University of Melbourne

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree: Doctor of Philosophy

## **Declaration**

1. The thesis comprises only original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
3. The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

Signed: Eloise Thomson

Date: 28 October 2020

## **Preface**

This research commenced at Victoria University where ethics approval was granted by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Acknowledgements

I don't think that anyone could say they had an easy research journey. Writing this dissertation was often challenging. I was working full time and studying when my life changed with a diagnosis of breast cancer. Although I attempted to continue my research and writing throughout treatment, the fog of chemotherapy presented an immense barrier. I am extremely proud that after four surgeries, sixteen rounds of chemo and six weeks of radiation, I have completed both cancer treatment and my PhD! I have many people to thank who have supported and helped me through my candidature over the years:

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- I would finally like to acknowledge my mother, who is the strongest person I know. I am proud that I am the first in my family to attend university and acknowledge that without the support of my family this would not have been possible.

Many thanks

## **Abstract**

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has undergone unprecedented change over the past two decades, both globally and within Australia. Prompted by reports from the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the Australian Government enacted a reform agenda in 2008, aiming to raise the quality of provision in ECEC.

This suite of policy reforms saw the introduction of the National Quality Standards (NQS) (2009), Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2009), Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011) and the Assessment and Ratings system (2012). A core element of the reform agenda is the mandate of collaborative partnerships with families.

Building sustainable collaborative partnerships has been linked to overall improved social, emotional and academic outcomes for children (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Daniel, 2015; Epstein, 2001). The underlying premise of the inclusion of collaborative partnerships in policy reforms is the contention that economic returns are increased through the process of enacting social change. It has been argued that this suite of policy reforms, including the NQS and EYLF, are grounded in a neoliberal discourse where economic returns are the fundamental driver for investment and regulation of ECEC services (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013; Hunkin, 2018).

With social media a rapidly emerging phenomenon, the ways in which people communicate and collaborate are continually evolving. This research sought to gain insight into the new opportunities that social media may afford to collaborate with families in the early years. Engaging with a Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994) theoretical framework, this research took an inclusionary rather than exclusionary approach, whereby existing practices were valued with new practices not superseding, or preferencing, existing ways of collaborating. The research

design employed an exploratory case study methodology to gain greater insights into current practices of collaborating with families through the use of three individual cases, each exploring the potential of different social media platforms.

Principal findings indicate that social media does offer new opportunities for collaborative practices in early childhood. Educators and families alike noted that the benefits of social media were ease of use, immediacy, and ease of access. However, the use of social media by educators appeared to be dominated by evidence around compliance issues and attaining quality in a very specific, and perhaps narrow, way. The findings suggest a culture of compliance that is dominated by outcomes, standards and assessments and that this has changed the dynamics by which educators engage with families. In analysing the findings, the use of social media as a means of collaborating with families, this study found that educators were using social media to evidence compliance and attainment of imposed quality standards in very specific ways. Although some may argue that introducing these reforms does ensure quality provision, it could also be contended that ECEC has been hijacked by a policy agenda, which has created a landscape of compliance that is assessed, measured and rated. This created a culture of compliance driven by the premise of attaining a singular notion of ‘quality’ for future economic returns. A reconceptualisation of quality, one that is inclusive of multiple perspectives would better facilitate collaborative partnerships and the early childhood sector more broadly.

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## List of abbreviations

|        |                                                             |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACECQA | Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority  |
| COAG   | Council of Australian Governments                           |
| DEECD  | Department of Education and Early Childhood Development     |
| DEEWR  | Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations |
| ECEC   | Early Childhood Education and Care                          |
| EYLF   | Early Years Learning Framework                              |
| NQF    | National Quality Framework                                  |
| NQS    | National Quality Standards                                  |
| OECD   | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development       |

## **Glossary of terms**

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Childcare    | Out-of-home day care for children aged birth to six, prior to school.<br><br>Includes long day care, occasional care, outside-of-school-hours care and family day care.                                                                      |
| Facebook     | An online social networking website that allows people to stay connected with friends and family. Facebook was created in 2004 and provides an online platform where people create profiles, share photos and updates and respond to others. |
| iOS          | iOS is the Apple Inc. operating system designed exclusively for Apple products such as the iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch. Globally, iOS is ranked second most popular mobile operating system after Android.                                  |
| Kindergarten | Also known as preschool, an education program generally delivered by a Bachelor qualified educator, in the year before school.                                                                                                               |
| Pedagogista  | The role of a pedagogista takes inspiration from Reggio Emilia, where a pedagogical mentor supports and challenges educators' practice to enrich early childhood policy and practice.                                                        |
| Policy       | Principles, rules and guidelines formulated or adopted by organisations or individuals to reach a long-term goal.                                                                                                                            |
| Qualtrics    | A web-based survey tool that allows for collection of data.                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Social media | Enables the creation and sharing of electronic communication such as photos, videos, messages and users' information in an online platform.                                                                                                  |

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Storypark   | An online platform accessed via an iOS <sup>1</sup> or Android <sup>2</sup> app that allows educators to document and record learning and share this information.                                                                          |
| Web 2.0     | The tools of Web 2.0 emphasise user generated content and include blogs, wikis and social networking platforms. Web 2.0 tools allow users and communities of practice to move beyond receiving information to interact and create content. |
| Working Bee | A term used to describe the informal meeting of families at the education setting to carry out communal work such as gardening and general maintenance.                                                                                    |

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<sup>1</sup> iOS is the mobile operating system that Apple use for its hardware

<sup>2</sup> Android is a mobile operating system developed by Google

# **1 Chapter one: Introduction**

## **1.1 Chapter overview**

This research explores the use of social media for collaborations with families in the early years. This chapter begins with a personal vignette that provides background to the genesis of the research itself. The context of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia was introduced as policy reform has been a critical driver in the requirement to establish collaborative partnerships with families. Collaborative partnerships are discussed in the context of relevant research literature supporting why they may be perceived as being facilitators of social change and future economic investment. The concept of quality is introduced since the notion of quality features heavily throughout this research. The research question and aims of the study are outlined, and the theoretical framework and methodological approach discussed. This section concludes with an overview of the chapters which outline the development and progression of the research.

## **1.2 A personal vignette**

I began my career as a kindergarten teacher in a suburban sessional kindergarten in 1999. Engaging with families and building positive relationships has always been an integral part of my role as an educator. Greeting families as they arrive, ensuring you know parents' names, and discussing children's overall progress will always be a fundamental element of teaching. Yet, over time, what was always merely part of the job and willingly done by educators, has changed into something that is mandated by policy and measured in terms of standards and outcomes.

Early childhood education has undergone much reform since I first began my career, with policy reforms driving an agenda of quality practice. Many of the traditional practices that I used to engage with families are still being implemented, and although these practices may still hold value, do they meet the new requirements of collaborative practice? While working in a local government setting as an educational leader, I witnessed educators adapting to new educational reforms by trialling a range of strategies to engage with families and build collaborative partnerships. Many educators used traditional practices such as newsletters, parent helpers and working bees (communal gathering to do general maintenance) as a means of creating partnerships. However, some educators were attempting new, perhaps more twenty-first century ways of collaborating – using social media.

In a climate where everything about your practice as an educator is measured, I witnessed educators attempting to engage with families by using social media, in a bid to exceed the quality standards in collaborative partnerships. With the best of intentions, but without guiding policy or research-based practice, the implications of social media use with families resulted in concerns of professional identity and ethical practice. Educators using their personal Facebook page to collaborate with families while also posting questionable content over their weekends caused me many a headache! This research was conceived in an attempt to assist educators in navigating the use of social media to build collaborative partnerships with families that would enhance educators' practice. The research questions this guided this study were: *How does the use of social media, provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting? And, what are the implications of the use of social media for educators?*

As I got further into the research, I began to question the policy agenda and mandate for collaborative partnerships equalling quality practice. The notion of quality itself became the focal point of my research, and the further I looked, the more questions I had. What were the

early childhood reforms based upon? If the mandates were based upon economic investment for capital growth, then whose quality is that? It became apparent that quality was subjective and dependent upon the intent of the stakeholder. What then was quality in terms of collaborative partnerships? Did the mandates, and therefore the practices employed by educators, meet the needs of families in terms of what families needed or wanted from partnerships?

The theoretical framework of Third Space (Bhabha, 1994) is underpinned by the notion of exploring possibilities that exist when spaces or binaries are combined. Applying this framework allowed me to question what happens when policy reforms influence practice, including challenging the notion of quality in terms of collaborative partnerships and social media. It was a navigational space for making sense of my emerging questions. The inductive flexible nature of the research methodology allowed for alternative questions to be spontaneously generated to guide the research as new ways of thinking and doing emerged.

The findings in this research highlight that quality collaborative partnerships are subjective and dependent upon the stakeholder's inherent wants and needs of the partnerships itself. Although the research did uncover some implicit recommendations for using social media, the intention of the collaborations themselves was far more insightful.

### **1.3 Background and context of the research**

Globally, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has undergone much change in this century. The Australian ECEC sector has seen significant reforms over the past two decades, based on several policy reforms prompted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The suite of policy reforms has been introduced as a driver for continuous improvement and raising the quality of ECEC in Australia. These policy reforms are especially pertinent to this research as

policy now mandates that educators develop collaborative partnerships with families as one of the National Quality Standards (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012).

### **1.3.1 Policy reforms in the Australian context**

The introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) (DEEWR, 2009) was the beginning of policy change in Australia, including new National Quality Standards (NQS), the first national curriculum, and the enactment of the Education and Care Services National Law (ACECQA, 2010). The introduction of the NQS saw the identification of seven quality standards that articulated the criteria by which quality was to be assessed (ACECQA, 2012). All education and care services within Australia are measured and assessed against items arranged in these seven quality areas.

Another key initiative of the NQF was the introduction of a shared curriculum framework for all states and territories within Australia that would guide the education and care of children birth to five (DEEWR, 2009). The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Belonging, Being & Becoming (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) provided a vision for the education of children and was built upon Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes for children.

New reform agendas in Australian early childhood education and care have seen a strong focus on providing collaborative partnerships for families. Collaborative partnerships with families were viewed as an integral component of the NQS and EYLF. Quality Area Six of the NQS is focused on collaborative partnerships with families, whereas one of the five Principles embedded within the EYLF is Partnerships (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The quality standards and curriculum documents mandate that early childhood educators build collaborative partnerships with families that involve support

for parenting and shared decision making through valued and trusting relationships. As collaborative partnerships are an integral aspect of policy reform in Australia, collaborative partnerships will be discussed more broadly.

### **1.3.2 Collaborative partnerships in early childhood education and care**

Terms such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘collaborative practice’ hold varied meanings across the field of ECEC and can sometimes be inconsistent in the domains of policy, research and educational practice. Collaborative partnerships with families can mean many things, and therefore defining them is complex. Borgonovi and Montt (2012) define collaborative practice as “... parents’ active commitment to spend time to assist in the academic and general development of their children” (p. 20). Whereas, Amendt (2008) discusses a continuum of collaboration by which interactions between parents and teachers can be measured in terms of the level of authenticity or stage of development, which increases in degree. Research on the positive effects of collaborative practice on student academic achievement is robust (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Daniel, 2015; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001). Approaches to building collaborative partnerships tend to be grounded in traditional methods incorporating communicating with families and volunteering, where parents assist in classroom activities (Daniel, 2015; Epstein, 1987). Many traditional methods of collaboration involve families being physically present in the learning environment or appear to be fundamentally about informing rather than collaborating.

Traditionally, research suggests that when parents are involved in the education setting, children are more successful (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Epstein, 1987, 2001). Decades of research on developing successful parent–teacher relationships and the educational benefits of doing so indicate that family involvement in education significantly improves student outcomes (Carter, 2002; Wong, Press, Sumsion, & Hard, 2012). The notion of investing in

collaboration in the early years is supported by the research of Wong et al. (2012), who assert that when families, educators and the educational setting have strong partnerships, outcomes for children are improved through social inclusion which, more broadly, significantly reduces the effects of social disadvantage (Wong et al., 2012).

### **1.3.3 Social investment and neoliberalism**

Reform agendas in Australian early childhood education and care have seen a strong focus on providing collaborative partnerships with families in an attempt to invest in future generations and reduce the incidents of disadvantage (Australian Government, 2007; Ball, 2012). Such policy reforms have primarily been driven by the premise that social investment strategies such as focusing on education and employment rather than on welfare are, in fact, investments that will bring economic returns (Ball, 2012; Productivity Commission, 2007). However, researchers such as Dahlberg et al. (2013) and Hunkin (2018), assert that the notion of investing in quality early childhood education and care has been based on a neoliberalist agenda that perceives education and childhood as a commodity for investment and future return.

According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015) and Smith, Tesar, and (2016), neoliberal policy emphasises productivity, performance and profit as a means of social change for economic good. Researchers such as Dahlberg et al. (2013); Hunkin (2016b); Olssen and Peters (2005) and Smith et al. (2016), have interrogated the notion of neoliberalism within education, both globally and within Australia. Within the Australian context, the reform agenda and policy mandates demonstrate the concept of social investment for economic productivity. This is supported by Hunkin (2016a) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015), who assert that the Australian early childhood reform agenda is grounded in a neoliberal economist framework which preferences economic return.

In a recent report from The Front Project (2019), Australia's cost-benefit analysis of investing in the early years was publicised. The study found that the investment of finances into early childhood education in the year before school has brought significant returns. More specifically, The Front Project (2019) asserts that for every dollar invested now, Australia reaps the rewards of two dollars back over a child's life. The assumption being that investing now in early childhood education and care can assist those in social disadvantage, on the basis that they will require less financial assistance at later stages of their life.

According to Hunkin (2016a, 2018) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015), over the past decade early childhood education has been the focus of a policy agenda driven by economic strategy and productivity returns. Scholars such as Ball (2012) and Hunkin (2016a) discuss edu-business as an opening of the education market for knowledge production and investment, with increasing commercialisation of education as a commodity. Consequently, the paradigm of edu-business has re-imagined early childhood education as a critical period needing smart investment for future return within the Australian economy.

Similarly, this has been made abundantly clear in the United Kingdom (UK) government report entitled 'Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings' (Allen, 2011). The notion of quality is central to this position. The premise seems to be – get the quality of early childhood right, and you will have made a smart investment and created a productivity agenda that drives the practices and principles of ECEC (Dahlberg et al., 2013). According to Olssen, Codd, and O'Neill (2004), the idea of what constitutes quality in ECEC has been globalised by governments and large organisations around the world, reducing the diversity and alternative possibilities. This has resulted in the dominance of standardised pre-packaged approaches to what early childhood education looks like.

Furthermore, according to Hunkin (2016a), the use of human capital as a basis for increasing productivity, was a driver of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework, resulting in the creation of outcome-driven curriculums based on a specific notion of quality: “Governments tend to cultivate education systems that align with the type of human capital education deemed necessary for a competitive productive workforce” (Hunkin, 2016a, p. 47). Consequently, future proofing for increased productivity has been fundamental in heightening the focus on ‘best practice’ and ‘quality in ECEC’ to ensure productive returns from future generations (Moss, 2014). The debate around ‘quality’ is not based on the notion that the education and care sector do not strive to provide the best outcomes for children, rather, that a singular and standardised notion of quality that is measured and quantified can only be interpreted one way (Fenech, 2011; Hunkin, 2018). With quality dominating the discourse of early childhood education and care, the notion of quality requires further discussion.

#### **1.3.4 What is quality in early childhood?**

Thus, as shown above, quality in early childhood education and care has been a dominant driver in policy reforms globally (Dahlberg et al., 2013). The notion of investing in the early years is based on a central idea that quality is the significant factor in yielding returns. According to Moss (2019) and Smith et al. (2016), much of the investment and focus on ECEC has been driven by the neoliberal agenda underpinned by the unattainable notion of quality.

In an early childhood vocabulary dominated by standards, elements, outcomes and assessment, who determines what quality looks like? The National Law, National Regulations and National Quality Standards are set by the Australian Government and dictate the rules of ECEC that educators must follow to produce quality in education and care. This dominant discourse of quality in ECEC settings is embedded in the National Quality Standards and Practice Principles in the curriculum frameworks. Education services are assessed against the quality standards

and elements in an assessment and rating process, with the findings published by the Quality Authority and used as yet another measure of rating quality between providers of ECEC. Consequently, educators have been convinced to accept this as quality practice without questioning its subjectivity.

Interrogating the notion of quality was not a primary consideration of this research design. The research was focused on examining the ways in which educators were using social media to collaborate with families. Yet, throughout the research journey, the notion of quality became paramount since it became apparent that it has framed a large part of the discussion within this research.

#### **1.4 Rationale for the research**

As previously outlined, policy reform has framed the education debate so that educators are encouraged to form collaborative partnerships with families. With social media as an educational environment rapidly emerging, opportunities for how people interact and communicate are evolving (Ahmed, Ahmad, Ahmad, & Zakaria, 2019). The use of social media as a platform for collaborative practice between families and educators may offer many benefits and potential.

To date, little research has been done on how social media can be used to engage with families in the early years. Terms such as ‘collaboration and ‘collaborative practice’ hold various meanings across the field of early childhood and can sometimes be inconsistent in the domains of policy, research and educational practice. Common misconceptions, or philosophical differences about what collaborative practice looks like, create a wide range of approaches about how educators engage and collaborate with families (Wong et al., 2012). Contemporary policy highlights the importance of involving families in this collaboration and aims for a partnerships approach with shared understandings and goals. With the rise in social media use,

both personally and professionally, social media as a platform was examined to uncover the potential of its use in collaborating with families.

Currently, the use of social media to collaborate with families is being implemented by some educators within ECEC. In practice, the result of limited policy directives provided to educators on how to engage families using social media has resulted in a range of methods with varied outcomes. In an attempt to meet the National Quality Standards (NQS) and prove quality, educators have used social media to evidence how they are meeting the mandate of collaborative partnerships. This research aims to address the gap in research in this field by examining the use of social media in collaborating with families in Australian ECEC settings. The research questions and aims of the study are explored below.

## **1.5 The research questions and aims**

This study seeks to gain insights into the ways in which social media is used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families. The overarching research question is: *How does the use of social media, provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting?*

Additional research question:

*What are the implications of the use of social media for educators?*

This research aimed to gain insights into the ways in which social media can be used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families, and investigate the implications of its use for educators. The study aimed to contribute to the academic debate by examining the influences on collaborative partnerships and the mechanisms by which educators engage with families. It is therefore significant as it explores the factors that are important in

collaborative partnerships and the implications of using social media on educators', families and education more broadly.

## **1.6 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework embedded in this research was drawn from Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Collazo, 2004). This research was concerned with identifying current practice in collaborating with families and the opportunities social media allowed in this space. The research allowed for the examination of collaborative practice through a Third Space lens, which aimed not to replace traditional practices but supplement current knowledge of engaging and collaborating with families in the early years.

Third Space theory has been articulated by Levy (2008) and Moje et al., (2004) as a space that allows for discussion, examination and the reimagining of knowledge. This research drew on Third Space Theory as a way of allowing new possibilities of collaboration to emerge using social media, without criticising the existing practice. The Third Space allowed for a hybridity of existing collaboration practices, merging them with existing social media practice to examine what emerged in the Third Space. Applying Third Space Theory to educational research allowed existing practices to be recognised, while providing an opportunity for the development of new opportunities to emerge within this Third Space. Third Space developed an inclusionary, not exclusionary, approach to researching social media use in collaborating with families. In this research, the first space was the traditional collaborative practice, the second space was social media context, and the third space was a hybrid space which allowed for the examination of opportunities when collaborative practice and social media intersect.

## **1.7 Methodological approach**

This research adopted mixed methods design that incorporated surveys and the creation of three exploratory case studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design consisted of two phases. The first collected data in two surveys with educators that considered the nature of parent collaborations and the use of social media, and encompassed both open and closed questions (Adams, Khan, & Raeside, 2007; Sapsford, 2007). The initial survey data of the educators' responses was analysed using both descriptive statistics (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017) and formed the basis for identification of the cases which acted as the second phase. Subsequently, all data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis drawing on the processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved firstly becoming familiar with the data, identifying frequently occurring codes, generating codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes and refining the specifics of the themes. Vignettes to illustrate the themes are used throughout the findings. Thematic analysis provided a lens from which educators and families were able to share their perspectives on the use of social media in collaborating.

In an exploratory design, quantitative data is generally collected and analysed first, followed by the more focused qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morehouse, 2012). A mixed methods paradigm was selected to ensure that a sufficient range of data addressing the aims of the research and the research questions was obtained. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data provides a broader understanding, then the qualitative data allows for a more in-depth analysis of the area of study.

This case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2012) examined the ways in which three different social media applications (email, Facebook and Storypark – refer to Chapter two, section 2.5.1 for more information on Storypark) are currently being used in Victorian early childhood settings

to engage and collaborate with families. Although not specifically recognised as a form of social media, email was identified by participants as a new technology that had changed the way in which they collaborate with families. Through the surveys, participants identified that email offered social interactions similar to those provided by traditional social media, and as such was included as one of the cases within this research.

A strength of a case study is that it allows for an in-depth exploration of a setting and the participants' experiences and perspectives within that setting (Stark & Torrance, 2005). Case study methodology was employed in this research as it allowed for educators' perceptions, practices and insights to be shared in the context of their setting. Having multiple cases allowed for richer descriptions and comparison of findings to better inform the study and address the research questions.

### **1.7.1 Methods**

As stated above, employing a mixed methods design that incorporated surveys and the creation of three exploratory case studies (Creswell & Clark, 2018), data was initially collected through a survey for educators to ascertain current collaborative practices employed. An initial survey (Appendix A) posted on an early childhood educators' private Facebook page provided a snapshot of practices within a broader context and called for volunteers for the case study. The survey incorporated closed questions such as Likert scale (Likert, 1932) and attitude statements (Adams et al., 2007; Sapsford, 2007) as well as open ended questions to which respondents could write a short response.

In providing the snapshot of current collaborative practice and social media use the results allowed for further exploration of data to be gathered in the cases. The initial survey led to the development of a secondary survey (Appendix D) for the purposes of ascertaining more detailed information about the types of social media being used, and to recruit participants for

the case study. Initially there were twenty-three volunteers who wanted to be part of the case study. The secondary survey asked open ended questions about social media use. The responses to the secondary survey allowed for the recruitment of participants for the cases, these were based on the types of social media being used in each setting. From the twenty-three volunteers, twelve completed the secondary survey and all were included in the cases. The twelve participants were from five different settings, however they were incorporated into three separate cases on the basis of the type of social media being used – email, Storypark and Facebook. In the cases themselves, the data was qualitative and included individual educator interviews, observations and immersion in the setting, informal conversations with families and the analysis of artefacts such as Facebook posts. Examples of ‘postings’ as artefacts also allowed for a detailed picture of each case, and therefore each social media platform. Families’ perspectives were included through the use of an online Qualtrics survey, with the link circulated to families across all case study sites. Additionally, researcher immersion in each setting also allowed for families perspectives to be shared through informal conversations, which have been presented as vignettes throughout the study.

## **1.8 Structure of the thesis**

This research has been structured into six chapters which are outlined below.

### **Chapter one: Introduction**

This chapter provides a personal vignette which outlines the conception of the research topic and its significance within education research. The research questions and aims are established, and a discussion on the methodology and theoretical framework that underpins the research design is presented.

## **Chapter two: Literature review**

Chapter two provides a literature review that contextualises the landscape of early childhood education and care in Australia. The literature review provides a discussion on the research pertinent to the development of this study, including:

- The policy reform in Australian ECEC
- Collaborative partnerships within policy
- The value and role of collaborative partnerships
- The subjective nature of quality in ECEC
- The potentialities of social media

## **Chapter three: Methodology and theoretical framework**

The methodology chapter outlines, justifies and rationalises the methodological design and theoretical framework that underpins the research. It demonstrates how the use of Third Space Theory provides a lens for the emergence of new possibilities. Recruitment and participant details are discussed alongside how the case studies were determined. Analytical methods for interpreting data are also explained and justified.

## **Chapter four: Findings**

The findings chapter reports the survey findings and data gathered through the interviews and case studies. The chapter brings together a discussion on educators' perceptions, how social media is being used, and the implications for practice. Artefacts from the research are analysed and discussed in light of the literature presented in chapter two.

## **Chapter five: Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter provides a discussion on the key themes in light of the notion of quality as being subjective. The implications for educators, families and education more broadly are discussed.

The chapter returns to the original research questions and provides insights into a re-imagining of quality. The study concludes with a conclusion and directions for future research.

## **Chapter six: Postscript**

This chapter provides a postscript investigating the use of social media in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Participants are revisited, and the complexities of engaging and collaborating with families through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed.

### **1.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduced the research and contextualised it within the policy landscape of early childhood education and care in Australia. It provided an overview of the relevant literature, rationale for the research, and significance within the field of education. The theoretical framework for the exploratory mixed methods study design was presented alongside a justification for the application of the framework. The reader was guided through the structure of the study, which contextualises how the research aims to seek knowledge of how social media provides new opportunities for collaborative practice within the Australian early childhood and care sector.

## **2 Chapter two: Literature review**

### **2.1 Chapter overview**

The literature review provides an overview of the policy context for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia, which highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining partnerships with families in the early years. The notion of quality, which is prevalent in Australia's policy landscape, is challenged, alongside a review of the literature on what constitutes quality in ECEC. In this research, the term 'collaborative partnerships' refers to the nature of the relationships between families and early childhood educators whereby each value the other's knowledge, where they communicate freely and respectfully, and engage in shared decision making for the good of the child. This definition of collaborative partnerships is based upon the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) which is the guiding curriculum framework for educators in Australia. This chapter includes a discussion of new technologies and social media and the ways in which they have shaped communication and relationships in the last decade. For the purposes of this research, social media generally refers to electronic resources and online environments that allow people to share and update information, establish relationships online that may continue offline, and communicate and collaborate using a web-based online environment or application (Morecroft, Marr, & Kassotakis, 2009). Commonly

known examples of social media are Twitter<sup>3</sup>, Instagram<sup>4</sup>, Snapchat<sup>5</sup>, WhatsApp<sup>6</sup>, LinkedIn<sup>7</sup> and Facebook<sup>8</sup>.

## **2.2 Policy context in Australia: a changing landscape**

The Australian early childhood education and care sector has seen significant reforms over the past two decades based on several policy reforms prompted by reports from The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This section provides a discussion on the suite of policy reforms, governance and operating structures within Australian ECEC. Table 1 provides an overview of these policy documents, while Figure 1 is adapted from Cumming, Sumsion, and Wong (2015) and illustrates the suite of policy reforms. Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a visual of the changes within ECEC in the Australian context and demonstrate the degree to which policy reform has shaped ECEC over the past two decades. The Australian policy documents informed this research and are significant to the discussion of collaborative partnerships within the ECEC sector as they have shaped the national context and changed the ways in which educators work.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/accounts/login/>

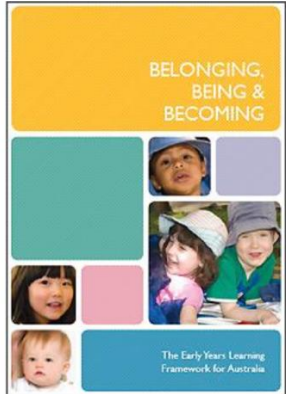
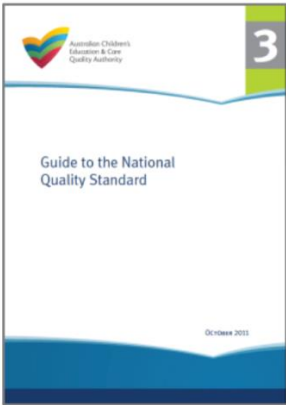
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.snapchat.com>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.whatsapp.com>

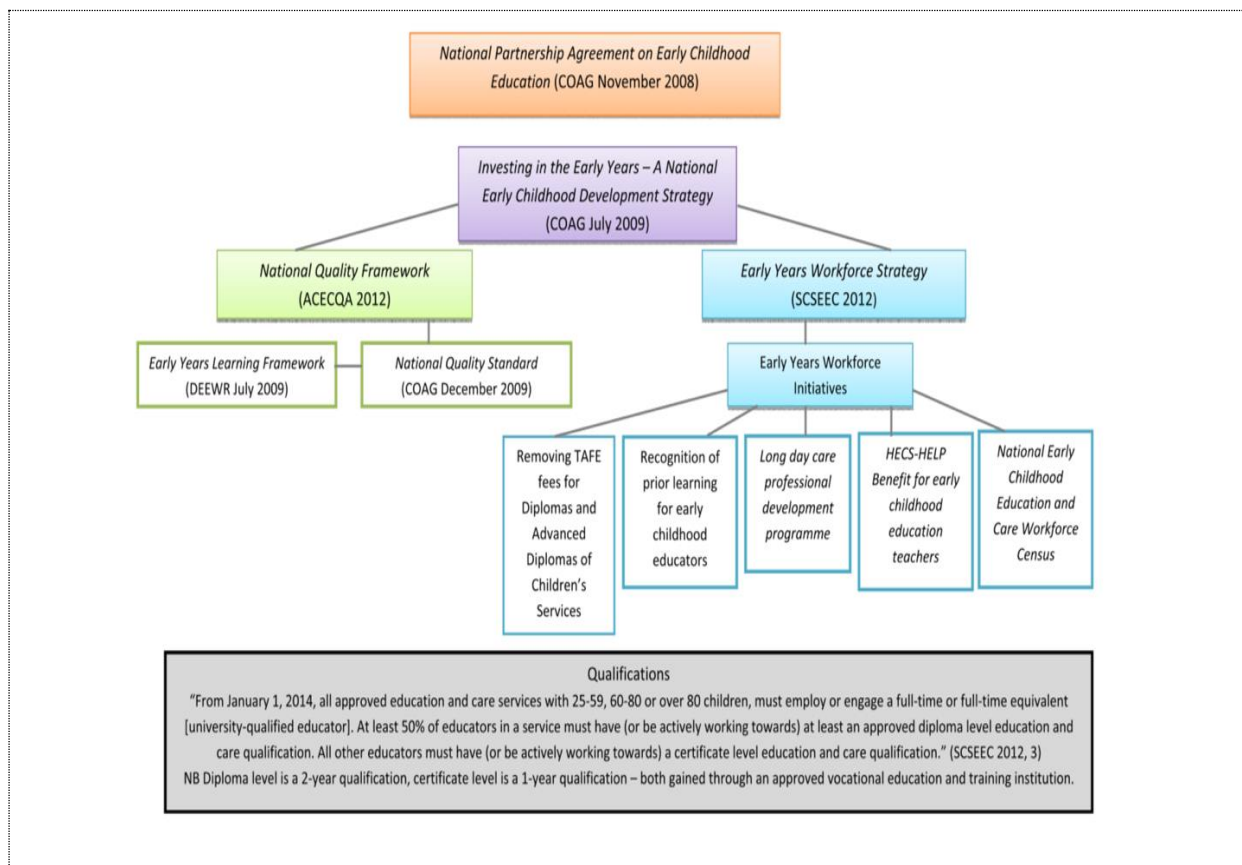
<sup>7</sup> <https://au.linkedin.com>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com>

**Table 1: Overview of Australia's policy documents**

| Australian policy documents                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>The National Partnership Agreement</b><br/>2008, Council of Agreed Governments (COAG)</p>                                                                                                                                  |  <p>NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT ON THE NATIONAL QUALITY AGENDA FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE</p> <p>An agreement between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Commonwealth of Australia and</li> <li>the States and Territories, being: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The State of New South Wales</li> <li>The State of Victoria</li> <li>The State of Queensland</li> <li>The State of Western Australia</li> <li>The State of South Australia</li> <li>The State of Tasmania</li> <li>The Australian Capital Territory</li> <li>The Northern Territory of Australia</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Through this Agreement, the Commonwealth and the States and Territories will work together to implement the National Quality Agenda for early childhood education and care.</p> |
| <p><b>Early Years Strategy</b><br/>2009, Council of Australian Governments (COAG)<br/>Investing in the Early Years –A National Early Childhood Development Strategy (Early Years Strategy)</p>                                   |  <p>Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy</p> <p>7 July 2009</p> <p>An initiative of the Council of Australian Governments</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p><b>The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)</b><br/>2009, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)<br/>Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)</p> |  <p>BELONGING, BEING &amp; BECOMING</p> <p>The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>The National Quality Standards (NQS)</b><br/>2011, Australian Children's Education &amp; Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), Guide to the National Quality Standards (NQS)</p>                                                |  <p>Australian Children's Education &amp; Care Quality Authority</p> <p>3</p> <p>Guide to the National Quality Standard</p> <p>October 2011</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

**Figure 1: Overview of changes within Australian ECEC context**



(Cumming et al., 2015, p. 2)

In 2008, The National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (Department of Education, 2020) established a unified and integrated national system for ECEC – which was jointly governed to drive continuous improvement in quality service provision. In 2009, COAG published *Investing in the Early Years: A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), which prompted an eleven-year period of significant early childhood education and care reforms. The *Investing in the Early Years Strategy* (COAG, 2009) was a response to the 2001 *Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia* report published by the OECD, in which several issues were raised regarding the quality of education and care in Australia (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). The 2009 strategy was a culmination of the work of all states and territories to deliver a shared vision to ensure

that all children “had the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 4). This resulted in aligning shared practices, standards and regulations in each state and territory in Australia. According to COAG (2009):

... the strategy will guide Australia's comprehensive responses to evidence about the importance of early childhood development and the benefits and cost-effectiveness of ensuring all children experience a positive early childhood ... It will also support Australia to better meet the diverse needs of today's families and focus on improving child outcomes and foster the health and wellbeing and productivity of our next generation. (2009, p. 4)

Prompted by the release of the Early Years Strategy (COAG, 2009) was the National Quality Agenda, comprising the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012), which essentially brought compliance of licensing and quality provision together under one umbrella. The NQF encompassed the seven *National Quality Standards* (NQS) and the *Early Years and Development Framework: Belonging, Being, and Becoming* (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). These reforms influenced a range of factors such as: raising minimum qualifications, increasing educator and staff ratios, increasing hours of government-funded four-year-old kindergartens, and a shared curriculum document, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), throughout Australia. These changes were aimed at ensuring consistency of quality early childhood education and care across all states and territories within Australia (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

Australian policy reform is consistent with approaches seen globally, with ECEC policy being a key priority for many countries in the developed world (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Hunkin, 2016b). The ECEC policy reform agenda bears similar characteristics to policy

reforms in other countries such as Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand (Ball, 2012; Irvine & Farrell, 2013). According to Jones, Osgood, Holmes, and Urban (2016) and Hunkin (2016b) the focus on ECEC policy has shifted from relative obscurity to being subjected to sustained scrutiny, resulting in policy changes centred on a narrative of “quality imperative” (Logan, Press, & Sumsion, 2012, p. 4). Research in the United States (Zuckerman, Garrett, Sarver, & Huddleston-Casas, 2020), United Kingdom (Osgood, 2009) and predominately North America (Dahlberg et al., 2007) reference economist Heckman (2012) and the relationship of investing in ECEC for future productivity. Zuckerman et al. (2020) assert that the United States “policy arena has been subjected to reform efforts as key areas for improving educational, economic and other outcomes” (p.1). Similarly, the ECEC policy reforms globally have policy orientated towards a productivity agenda that is underpinned by a narrative of quality (Hunkin, 2016a; Irvine & Farrell, 2013; Zuckerman et al., 2020).

As established, the reforms both globally and within Australia have largely been driven by the “quality imperative” based on the productivity agenda of cost/benefit assertions such as those put forward by Heckman and Masterov (2007). The premise of the cost/benefit narrative is that investing in high quality ECEC now saves money in the future (Heckman, 2012; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; The Front Project, 2019). The term quality is central to this narrative to ensure returns on investment are successful. According to Fenech, Giugni, and Bown (2012) the “market approach” to ECEC has significant implications when driven by profitability imperatives and that the Australian reforms do little to ensure that children get the best start in life. Criticisms of the reforms are centred around the regulation to meet minimum standards, lack of adequate staffing requirements, equity and access to ECEC settings that score well under the assessments, and families capacity to determine quality based on minimum regulatory standards and systems (Fenech et al., 2012; Logan et al., 2012).

The NQF falls well short of ushering in transformative change that will ensure all children in Australia have access to quality ECEC. The continued reliance on regulatory reform in the absence of much needed structural policy can only lead to cosmetic change and improvements that will lead to, at best, the meeting of regulatory minimum standards. In this context, high quality ECEC may be provided but it will be driven by individual teachers, educators, managers and governing bodies, and not by regulatory reform. (Fenech et al., 2012, p. 12)

Although researchers such as Fenech et al. (2012) challenge the ability of the reforms to produce real change, they highlight that striving for mediocrity in the form of minimum standards is not enough. Investigating the policy reform and drivers for change are a study in their own right, however in the circumstances of this research a critique of the policy reform and the ways this has shaped educators work is important in providing context.

The introduction of the policy reforms, and hence their discussion in this research, are significant as under the suite of reforms educators work is now more regulated and driven by an agenda of compliance in a bid to meet ‘quality’ (Grant, Danby, Thorpe, & Theobald, 2016). The following sections unpack the policy changes and key documents that relate to the study and provide context as to why educators are striving to demonstrate how they are meeting minimum standards.

### **2.2.1 The National Quality Standards (NQS) – (2011)**

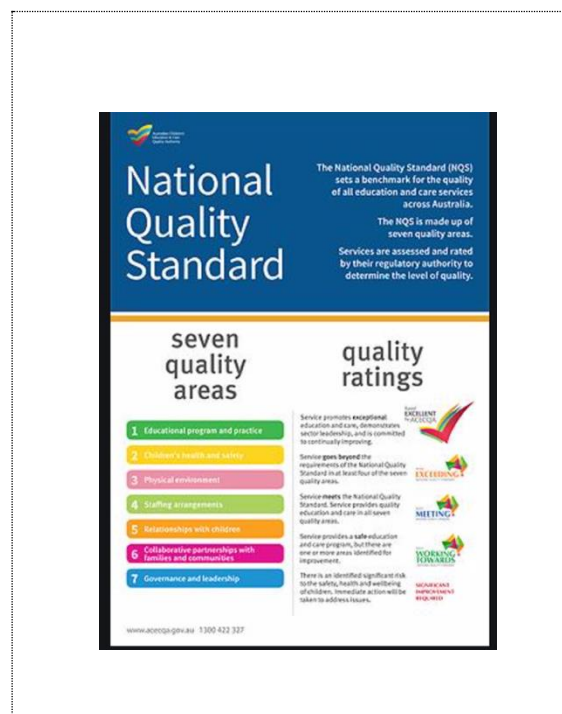
Shortly after the release of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2011, the National Quality Standards (NQS) were released Australia wide. The NQS encompassed seven quality standards and articulated the criteria by which quality was to be assessed (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). The NQS sets a benchmark for quality in the delivery of early childhood education and care Australia wide. The seven quality areas are:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Governance and leadership

(ACECQA, 2012, p. 91).

These seven quality areas were aimed at ensuring consistency in the delivery of quality ECEC, both in licensing compliance, service delivery, and educational programs. Figures 2 and 3 outline the seven quality areas of the NQS for all early childhood education and care services

**Figure 2: The National Quality Standards**



**Figure 3: The Seven Quality Areas**



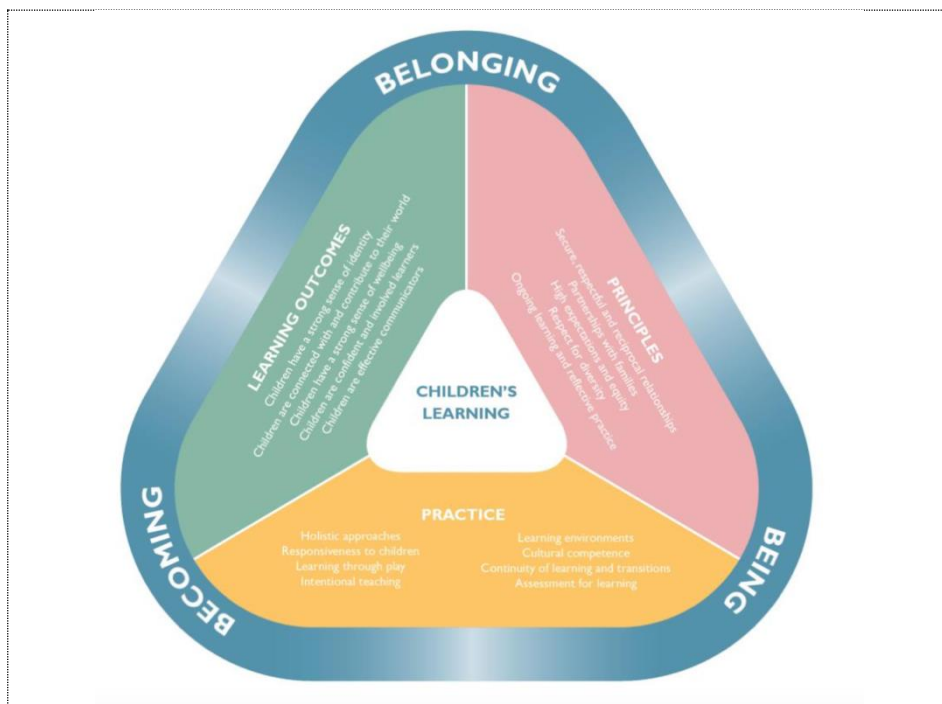
(Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 91)

In 2011, to oversee the NQS and ensure consistency in the rating and assessment of the seven quality areas, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) was formed. This was the first time that all states and territories within Australia were regulated by the one licensing and quality authority (ACECQA, 2012). ACECQA is currently responsible for the regulation of all ECEC settings within Australia. Quality Area One, Educational Program and Practice, and Quality Area Six, Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities, feature heavily throughout this study. Quality Area One, Educational Program and Practice, requires educators to evidence their curriculum planning, which is subsequently assessed through the Assessment and Rating process (refer to 2.2.5 for additional information on this). Educators commonly refer to Quality Area One as their curriculum or program planning. However, more recent research in early childhood globally, tends to use terminology such as ‘pedagogical practice’ and ‘pedagogical documentation’ (Dahlberg, 2019). The terms curriculum planning, program planning and pedagogical documentation are used interchangeably throughout this research depending upon the context of practice or research.

### **2.2.2 The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Belonging, Being and Becoming (2009)**

A key initiative of the National Quality Framework was the establishment of a shared curriculum document that would guide all states and territories within Australia for the education and care of children from birth to five (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The EYLF vision for learning is that “all children experience learning that is engaging and builds success for life” (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 7). The EYLF was built upon Principles, Practices, and Learning Outcomes for children, refer to Figure 4.

**Figure 4: The Early Years Learning Framework**



(DEEWR, 2012, p11)

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a shared curriculum document and is a central component of the National Quality Framework (NQF). The EYLF outlines the principles, practices and outcomes required to support and enhance children's learning from birth to five years of age (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). All educators working with children, regardless of qualification, are guided in pedagogy and practice under the EYLF. Some states and territories throughout Australia have also developed their own adaption of the EYLF (Table 2), which contains the same principles, practice, and outcomes. The EYLF or equivalent is the guiding pedagogical document used by educators throughout Australia.

**Table 2: Curriculum documents used in each jurisdiction**

| JURISDICTION       | NAME OF EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENT                                                                |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National           | Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia                           |
| New South Wales    | Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia                           |
| Northern Territory | Northern Territory Preschool Curriculum                                                                 |
| Queensland         | Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guide (QKLG)                                                           |
| South Australia    | Reflect Respect Relate<br>Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia |
| Tasmania           | Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia                           |
| Victoria           | Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)                                       |
| Western Australia  | Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia                           |

### **2.2.3 Educator qualifications in Australia**

The introduction of the NQF and EYLF saw the refocusing of those working in the Australian childcare sector away from “nice ladies who love children” (Stonehouse, 2006, p. 61) to a more professionally recognised title of ‘early childhood educators’. Under the EYLF, “early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings are referred to as educators” (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 5). This change focused attention on lifting the profile of early childhood educators, and hence a push to increase the qualifications of those working with children (Cook, Corr, & Breitkreuz, 2017). ACECQA mandated the requirement that all educators hold a minimum of a Certificate III, of those holding a Certificate III 50 per cent would be working towards a Diploma qualification, and education settings with over twenty-five staff to have a Bachelor qualified educator (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). All educators

working in ECEC are now referred to as early childhood educators regardless of the level of qualification obtained. The qualifications for working in the ECEC field in Victoria are set out in Table 3 and are current as of August 2020. Educator qualifications are relevant in terms of this research as distinctions between social media use and educator qualifications are made in the findings.

**Table 3: Overview of Australian ECEC qualifications**

| TITLE             | LEVEL      | APPROXIMATE DURATION | AUSTRALIAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK LEVEL |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Certificate III   | TAFE       | 6 months             | Level 3                                   |
| Diploma           | TAFE       | 18 months            | Level 5                                   |
| Bachelor's degree | University | 3–4 years            | Level 7                                   |

#### **2.2.4 Delivery of early childhood education and care within Victoria**

In Australia, ECEC can be known by a number of terms depending upon the state or territory, and can also be delivered by a range of providers. This section provides a brief overview of the delivery of ECEC services within the Australian context. Kindergarten, also known as preschool, is generally delivered in the year prior to the commencement of school and is delivered by a bachelor qualified early childhood educator (Victorian State Government, 2019). Table 4 outlines the program terminology and age requirements by Australian states and territories.

**Table 4: ECEC terminology throughout Australia**

| Australian state or territory | Program name | Age entry requirement  |
|-------------------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| Australian Capital Territory  | Preschool    | 4 by 30 April          |
| New South Wales               | Preschool    | Generally aged 4 and 5 |
| Northern Territory            | Preschool    | 4 by 30 April          |
| Queensland                    | Kindergarten | 4 by 30 June           |
| South Australia               | Preschool    | 4 by 1 May             |
| Tasmania                      | Kindergarten | 4 by 1 January         |
| Victoria                      | Kindergarten | 4 by 30 April          |
| Western Australia             | Kindergarten | 4 by 30 June           |

Based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics, AB (2018).

Within Australia, a range of providers can own and operate ECEC settings. As this research is primarily concerned with ECEC settings within the Victorian context, providers of ECEC in Victoria are presented. Kindergarten programs within Victoria can be owned and operated by a range of service providers such as local governments, non-profit and for-profit organisations. Those overseeing the provision of kindergartens are known as Early Years Managers (formerly known as Kindergarten Cluster Managers or KCMs) and can be community-run, local government-run, charity organisations or private businesses. ECEC providers are often discussed in terms of being for-profit or not-for-profit. Understanding the context and terminology of ECEC in Australia is relevant to this research as it provides the context in which the case studies were situated.

### **2.2.5 Assessment and ratings under the reforms**

The introduction of the suite of ECEC reforms and policies such as the NQF and EYLF, as discussed above, are based on achieving quality practice in ECEC settings. According to Tayler

(2011), these policies have been introduced by the Australian Government as indicators of quality in education and care, employing benchmarks, standards, and measures that heavily regulate the early childhood sector. The notion of what constitutes quality within policy and practice in ECEC is discussed in detail, refer to section 2.4. However, it is important to note here when discussing operational requirements under the Australian ECEC policy reforms, which have impacted the sector.

The NQF, comprising the seven quality areas, employs quality indicators designed to improve quality in the ways in which early childhood education and care is delivered in Australia. According to Grant, Comber, Danby, Theobald, and Thorpe (2018), the quality areas within the NQS are used to evaluate educators and early childhood services as a means of quality assurance within an accountability framework. Requirements such as educator to child ratios, educator qualifications, educational practice and pedagogical practice are assessed. In recent research conducted by Grant et al. (2018), they assert that the quality agenda has forced a shift in the way ECEC educators work due to the compliance-based quality discourse

the regulation of teachers' work is legitimized through the discourse of quality embedded in policy guidelines ... As teachers operationalise the expectations of quality assurance in the NQF, their work is orientated to gathering evidence of an approved quality of practice. (p. 515)

Consequently, the issue of quality within policy reform, including the Assessment and Ratings process, is relevant in terms of this research as they provide insight into the current landscape within ECEC.

In 2012, ACECQA instituted the Assessment and Rating process whereby all ECEC settings were externally evaluated against the NQS (as measures of quality) with ratings published publicly as a means of quality improvement (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality

Authority, 2012). All services within Australia are assessed and rated; this includes a rating for each of the seven quality areas (Figures 2 and 3) and one overall rating for the service.

Within the seven quality areas, there are eighteen standards and fifty-eight elements. ECEC services are assessed, judged and rated against all seven areas and awarded eight ratings – seven quality areas and one overall rating. The ratings awarded are:

- Excellent
- Exceeding National Quality Standards
- Meeting National Quality Standards
- Working Towards National Quality Standards
- Significant Improvement Required

(Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012)

Centre ratings are a public record used as a reflection of the quality of a setting and often used by families to inform setting choice. Centre ratings are available on the internet and must also, under the Education and Care Services National Law (2010), be displayed at the entrance of an ECEC provider (ACECQA, 2012). Therefore, achieving a positive result in the assessment and rating result is crucial when positioned in an environment of families as consumers of ECEC.

According to Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) the current Assessment and Ratings cycle, although it purports to improve quality of ECEC services, “reduces the high complex and disparate processes of relationships, learning and teaching ... and makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities” (p. 60). Likewise, Ritchie (2016) proposes that quality standards, such as those employed under national standards, are superficial blunt instruments lacking objectivity.

Furthermore, part of the Assessment and Rating cycle is the development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) whereby services perform a self-evaluation against the quality indicators. According to ACECQA, the QIP is a self-assessment completed by ECEC providers designed to measure “performance in delivering quality education and care and to plan for future improvements” (ACECQA, 2019, para. 2). The QIP is mandatory and a critical factor in determining a setting’s overall centre rating. The QIP calls for reflection of evidence and goal setting, which should also have family involvement. The research conducted by Grant et al. (2018) indicated that educators’ practice had been shaped by the increased accountability to evidence quality through the QIP, “The findings indicate a shift in professional focus to increased documentation of ‘quality of practice,’ goal setting and evidence of the collaborative construction of Quality Improvement Plans” (Grant et al., 2018, p. 515). Similarly, according to Ozga and Rinnie (2011), imposed requirements for teacher accountability under quality discourses can have influential effects on pedagogical practices, “steering teachers work at a distance” (Ozga & Rinnie, 2011, p. 75). Therefore, the requirement to develop and involve families in the QIP is relevant in this research as this research investigates the ways in which social media may influence collaborative practice in the early years, and the implications of this on practice. Having established that ECEC within the Australian context has undergone significant reform over the past two decades, the following section provides a discussion on collaborative partnerships within these reforms as they situate why educators are seeking collaborative partnerships with families.

### **2.2.6 Collaboration in national reforms**

The introduction of the EYLF and NQF by the Australian Government has not only pushed for improvements and greater accountability to achieve high-quality educational outcomes for children, it has also intensified the focus on collaborative partnerships with families that enhance educational outcomes for all.

The NQF and the EYLF require educators to build collaborative partnerships with families, going beyond traditional parent involvement activities to actively engage and develop respectful and supportive relationships with families. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships, as they are articulated in the policy documents, emphasise a level of reciprocity in the nature of parent–teacher collaboration. The National Quality Standards (2012) requires that families are supported in their parenting role and that “the expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision-making about their child’s learning and wellbeing” (2012, p 91). National Quality Standard Six under the NQS (Figure 5) is centred on collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

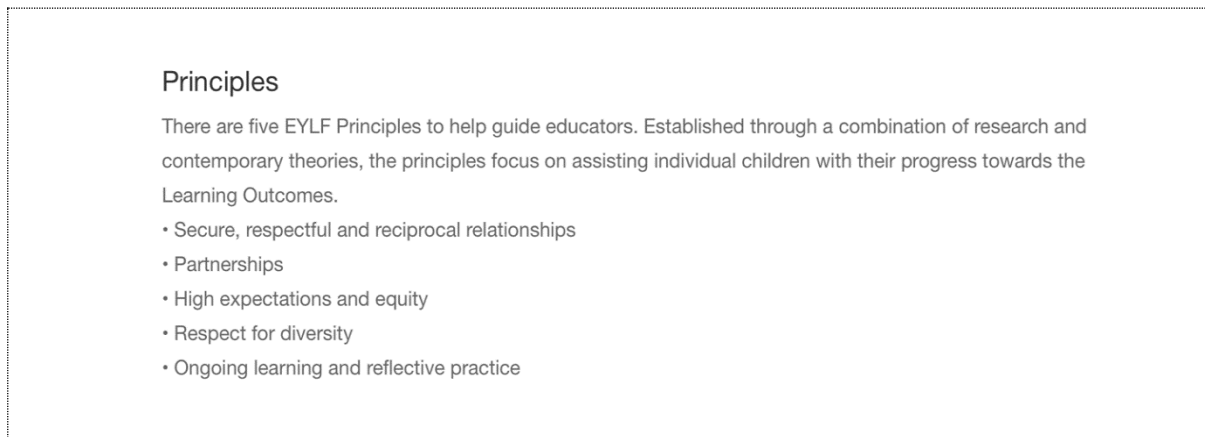
**Figure 5: National Quality Standard Six**

| QA6   |                                        | Collaborative partnerships with families and communities                                                                                                |
|-------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6.1   | Supportive relationships with families | Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role.                                 |
| 6.1.1 | Engagement with the service            | Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.                                                |
| 6.1.2 | Parent views are respected             | The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision-making about their child's learning and wellbeing.  |
| 6.1.3 | Families are supported                 | Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing. |
| 6.2   | Collaborative partnerships             | Collaborative partnerships enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing.                                                                        |
| 6.2.1 | Transitions                            | Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.                             |
| 6.2.2 | Access and participation               | Effective partnerships support children's access, inclusion and participation in the program.                                                           |
| 6.2.3 | Community engagement                   | The service builds relationships and engages with its community.                                                                                        |

(Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 91)

Collaborative partnerships with families are also seen as an integral component of the Australian Government's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), with one of the five EYLF principles embedded within the document being labelled as Partnerships. Figure 4 (p. 43) is an image of the EYLF showing the Principles, Practice, and Learning Outcomes for Children, while Figure 6 explains the Principles of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2012).

**Figure 6: The Principles from the EYLF**



(DEEWR, 2012, p.13)

Partnerships, as they are articulated in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), are “based on the foundations of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes and building on the strength of each other's knowledge” (p. 11). The EYLF identifies partnerships with families as one of the fundamental principles for educators' daily professional practice. According to the frameworks, partnerships between early childhood educators and families should:

- value each other's knowledge of each child
- value each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life
- trust each other
- communicate freely and respectfully with each other
- share insights and perspectives about each child
- engage in shared decision making

(DEEWR, 2009, p12)

The current Australian policy context positions parents as equal partners in terms of educational programs and practice in the early years, as outlined in Figures 5 and 6. Educational reforms support this notion with new mandated policy documents clearly articulating a partnership

approach to education where families are collaborators in the education process with professional educators. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships, as articulated in the policy documents, assume reciprocity and that educators and families make mutual decisions on education and care matters. On the one hand, parents are conceptualised as seeking assistance from educators yet are also seen as knowledgeable equal partners in the education process. Similarly, this is supported by Rouse (2012a), who suggests that the disempowerment and low professional status of educators problematise reciprocal collaborative partnerships that truly illustrate equality. Therefore, while engaging with families to build collaborative partnerships is vital to the successful implementation of the EYLF, specific actions regarding how to engage successfully with families as equal partners, and the strategies employed to do so, are problematic (Rouse & Obrien, 2017).

Collaborative partnerships feature heavily in Australian ECEC policy, as research suggests that partnerships are beneficial to children's overall success. Although policy reform in ECEC is well researched (Ball, 2012; Bown, 2014; Fenech et al., 2012), there is limited research in the area of policy and collaborative partnerships in ECEC. The research on collaborations tends to be located in the context of integrated service delivery (Zuckerman et al., 2020) and collaborations between ECEC professionals themselves (Irvine & Price, 2014). Consequently, this study is significant as it adds value and explores collaborative partnerships between educators and families through the use of social media within a changed policy context. The following section will discuss collaborative partnerships in more depth, investigating the factors affecting partnerships and the diverse needs of families.

## **2.3 Collaborative partnerships**

Terms such as ‘collaborative partnerships’ and ‘collaborative practice’ have varied meanings across the field of ECEC and can sometimes be confused and interchangeable due to their

inconsistency in the domains of policy, research and educational practice (Daniel, Wang, & Berthelsen, 2016; Wilder, 2014). This could be further explained by the nature of partnerships and that collaborative partnerships with families can mean many things, and therefore defining them is complex. The concept of collaborative partnerships is commonly referenced in connection to relationships between home, school and community in which families engage with their child's educators in order to support the education of their child (Daniel, 2015; Epstein, 1987, 2001). Collaborative practice can be defined as “... parents’ active commitment to spend time to assist in the academic and general development of their children” (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012, p. 20). In this way, collaborative partnerships are viewed by educators, governments and policymakers as being desirable and are frequently included in the discussion of what constitutes quality in early childhood education.

As discussed, policy reform in Australia has seen the introduction of quality initiatives such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS). In both these policy frameworks, partnerships with families are integral to the principles of quality education and care. The NQS Quality Area Six focuses specifically on collaborative partnerships with families with Standard 6.1 and Standard 6.2 centred around educators and families working together (Figure 5). As discussed in section 2.2.5, having clear evidence of how an education setting meets standards 6.1 and 6.2 is paramount in the Assessment and Rating of a service.

In the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), collaborative partnerships with families are defined by the following features:

- Mutual trust
- Open, respectful communication
- Empathy
- Openness to others' views, values and perspectives

- Shared decision making
- Clarity about roles and responsibilities
- Appreciation of each other's knowledge and experience
- Willingness to negotiate and compromise
- Commitment to resolve tensions and conflicts
- Shared aims or goals – what is best for the child

(Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012)

In this research, the term collaborative partnerships encapsulates these elements and realises that the definitions and features of elements vary to different degrees. It aligns with the terminology used in the EYLF and NQS to explicate the nature of collaborative partnerships. That is, collaborative partnerships include: families and early childhood educators who value each other's knowledge, communicate freely and respectfully, and engage in shared decision making for the good of the child (EYLF). Some features of collaborative partnerships as presented in the EYLF have attracted criticism from key researchers such as Hadley (2014) and Hadley and Rouse (2018). They assert that power and reciprocity in relationships is problematic and therefore difficult to navigate within collaborative partnerships – this is further explored in section 2.3.3. Having discussed the definition of collaborative partnerships more broadly, the importance and complexities of collaborative partnerships within education is now explored.

### **2.3.1 Partnerships with families**

To explore the role of collaborative partnerships in the education setting, it is important to review research that considers the reasons for and the benefits of collaborative partnerships between families and educators. Researchers widely acknowledge that there are positive outcomes for children and families when parents are involved in the educational setting and work together with educators for the common good of the child (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012;

Daniel, 2015). Research on collaborative partnerships within educational settings continues to affirm that there is a positive relationship between parental involvement and overall student success (Emerson et al., 2012). Research asserts that "parental involvement in family-school partnerships has been widely established as supporting and improving students' social, emotional and academic outcomes" (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 120). It appears that the majority of research on parental involvement has been conducted in the primary school context. Nevertheless, it is likely that some of these findings, such as improved academic and emotional success, are transferable to the context of the early childhood education setting (Einarsdottir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). As there is limited research on the use of social media in the early childhood setting, it can be assumed that research undertaken in similar education settings such as that of primary schools, could be used to make generalisations in the context of early childhood. It is for this reason that research that adds value to the aims of this study has been included.

Research suggests that when parents are involved in the education setting, children are more successful, academically, socially and emotionally (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Daniel, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001). Decades of research on developing successful parent-teacher relationships and the educational benefits of doing so indicate that family involvement in education significantly improves student outcomes (Carter, 2002). Furthermore, Henderson and Mapp (2002) support this assertion and claim that the benefits of collaborative partnerships are lifelong, "The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7). Similarly, studies by Dryfoos and Knauer (2004) and Henderson and Mapp (2002) affirm that the benefits of collaborative practice can include higher academic achievement, better attendance rates, and improved social skills (Dryfoos & Knauer, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). A wealth of documented evidence demonstrates that where collaborative partnerships are in place and where educators and families work together,

children thrive (Dalli, White, & Rockel, 2011; Daniel et al., 2016; Zhang, Du, Sun, & Ding, 2018).

There are many reasons for developing collaborative partnerships between families and the education setting. Partnerships can build a sense of community, improve programs for children, and support families in their role. However, a suggested pivotal reason for the creation of collaborative partnerships is to improve outcomes for children in later life (Daniel, 2016; Epstein, 1987; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research by Borgonovi and Montt (2012) indicates that there are several reasons why collaborative partnerships influence overall achievement. These include both academic and non-academic outcomes, for example, increased reading ability as well as higher levels of reading enjoyment. Additionally, Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) agree that when families are involved in the education setting, they may get an understanding of what the child is learning through observation of classroom activities and instructional teaching. Consequently, families that are involved in the education setting may also gain an understanding of where their child is at with their learning in terms of level, ability and understanding. This allows for a better understanding of the education process and provides opportunities for families to follow up and assist in learning at home. For instance, a parent who is assisting in the classroom can observe what is being taught and the level at which their child is understanding. Involvement can also be motivational in that it reinforces to the child that education and the setting are valued and of importance, hence resulting in positive perceptions and better engagement. For example, a child who sees their parent valuing education by being involved in school activities may develop a more positive attitude towards education in general (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Therefore, encouraging collaborative practice is seen to have positive overall benefits for learning in regard to both children and parents.

Having established that collaborative practice is beneficial to overall learner success, of similar importance is the ways in which families collaborate. The focus of much of the research into collaborative partnerships has been centred around simply improving how often families and educators collaborate (Pomerantz et al., 2007). To date, the research has focused on efforts to heighten families' collaborations, limited in this is the nature of the specificities of the collaborations themselves and the resulting implications for practice.

The volume of literature that focuses on parental involvement and collaborative practice continues to grow. However, there are clear differences between how the research defines collaboration and the mechanisms by which this is measured (Pomerantz et al., 2007). There are also additional differences in what constitutes improved achievement or what student outcomes mean. For instance, when the phrase 'improved achievement' is used:

- Does this refer to academic ability or social/emotional capacity?
- How is this being measured and assessed?
- What types and volume of parental involvement best produce improved results?

Without these factors being thoroughly investigated in current research, it is difficult to determine with any certainty the mechanisms affecting parental involvement and, thus, the likelihood of purposeful influence over student achievement and success. Similarly, generalisability of findings is problematic if there are a range of variables. Although it has been shown that there is a wealth of research on collaborative partnerships in education, a closer examination of these collaborative partnerships is required. It is imperative then to discuss the research on collaborative partnerships to examine the understandings of what collaboration looks like and the mechanisms by which it is measured.

To better understand the benefits of collaborative partnerships, a review of the literature surrounding the extent and types of partnerships is next presented. Research into the depth of

collaborative partnerships in early childhood is limited. Generalisations regarding improved outcomes for children whose families are involved in the education of their child are often made, yet the nature of the relationships and the perceived benefits require further investigation (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

In defining the nature of the collaborations that take place between families and the education setting, researchers have used differing strategies. Widely known researcher Epstein (1987) posits a framework that is inclusive of six types of involvement, including: parenting, communicating, volunteering, decision making, learning at home, and collaborating with the community. More recently, Pomerantz et al. (2007) describe the nature of collaborative practice as being either home-based or school-based. School-based collaborations appear to require families to make actual (physical) contact with schools via activities such as parent–teacher meetings, volunteering and attending events. Equally, home-based collaborations can be entered into via supporting the learning from home by discussing homework, and the child's learning experiences more generally (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

A review of the literature on families' engagement with schools also revealed that the ways in which families collaborate, and the degree of collaboration, is influenced by a range of factors such as socioeconomic background, family structure and country (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Pushor, 2013; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Amendt (2008) discusses a continuum of collaboration by which interactions between parents and teachers can be measured in terms of the level of authenticity or stage of development, which increases in degree. He asserts that the first stage, informing, depicts a one-way flow of information from schools to families; the second stage is an invitation to parents to be involved in ways that are driven by the school's agenda; the third stage involves ways of working together on a shared parent–school agenda; and the fourth stage encompasses shared goals and leadership in the school context (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Degrees of collaboration**



Stage 1: Informing = a one-way flow of information from schools to families

Stage 2: Involving = an invitation to parents to be involved in ways that are determined by the school, and in a way that supports and is driven by the school's agenda

Stage 3: Engaging = the parents and school create the agenda and ways of working that support the shared agenda

Stage 4: Leading = only occurs when there is shared and mutual trust and when both parents and schools take on the leadership of shared goals (Amendt, 2008)

These stages or degrees of collaboration presented in Figure 7 provide a useful basis for discussing the development of collaborative partnerships in educational settings in terms of information sharing and shared decision making. Many practices used to engage and collaborate with families struggle to go beyond the informing stage and are therefore not truly collaborative in their nature, according to the continuum (Amendt, 2008; Hedeon, Moses, & Peter, 2001). For example, information updates in weekly newsletters are sent home and are informative, yet they are not collaborative. Although, ideally, interactions and relationships with families should move beyond the information sharing and informing stage, it should not be assumed that collaboration progresses smoothly in a linear fashion (Amendt, 2008). It would be clearer to instead think of families moving interchangeably in and out of these stages throughout the progression of the partnership (Amendt, 2008; Hedeon et al., 2001). At times there may be a need to inform families rather than involve them in activities; these stages need to be interchangeable and flexible in nature. Furthermore, Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg (2010) discuss efforts of the education sector in engaging with families as random acts of family

involvement that are often disconnected and uncoordinated. They articulate that the current strategies employed do not promote family engagement and that reform in this area is required. They suggest collaborative partnerships as "systemic, integrated, and sustained" if authentic practices are going to be implemented (Weiss et al., 2010, p. 3). The literature explored in this section suggests that there are varying degrees and stages of collaboration between families and education settings. The following section explores the factors affecting partnerships with families and inherent complexities.

### **2.3.2 Factors affecting partnerships with families**

Collaborative partnerships with families are multifaceted and complex (Daniel, 2016; Rouse, 2012a). Understanding the factors that influence these partnerships (such as types of involvement and the diverse needs of families) is vital to unpacking the possible benefits of the partnerships themselves (Daniel et al., 2016; Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Although research suggests parental involvement has an overall positive impact on children and families, variables such as the family's social and economic background and the nature of the collaborations themselves can often be overlooked in the research design (Baker, Soden, & Clearinghouse, 1998; Daniel et al., 2016). Research on parental involvement has been inconsistent in addressing variables such as the fundamental terms and definitions of collaboration. This has restricted the application of findings to other contexts and generalisability of results. A study by Wilder (2014) found that the inconsistent definitions of key terms, methodologies, research questions and sampling processes led to difficulties in generalised findings on parental involvement. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of the research on parental involvement undertaken by both Wilder (2014) and Jeynes (2012), indicated that although much of the research features inconsistencies when addressing variables, parental

involvement continued to impact overall achievement positively. Consequently, examining the ways in which families are involved in collaborative practice requires investigation.

Building on existing literature that is aimed at increasing family involvement in education settings for overall success, Pomerantz et al. (2007) questioned the nature of the collaborations themselves. Central to their research was the understanding of “how, whom, and why of parents' involvement in children’s education is critical to maximising its benefits” (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 374). Pomerantz et al. (2007) investigated the relationship between the success of home involvement and school involvement in terms of how parents were involved and the benefits and overall success. Although their findings support the overall notion of improved outcomes for children, Pomerantz et al. (2007) assert that much of the research on family involvement does not take into account factors such as socioeconomic status and educational background of families. They found that:

... parental involvement is higher among parents with heightened socioeconomic status and educational attainment. For example, volunteering at school is less common among less educated (eg: 16% to 40% in 2003) than more educated (eg: 54% to 62% in 2003) parents. (United States Department of Education, 2006 as cited in Pomerantz et al., 2007, p.375)

Remembering that much of the reform in ECEC seen both in Australia and globally is based on the presumption that investing in regulatory reform has profitability imperatives (Hunkin, 2016b) as it has been seen to improve social disadvantage, the relevance of socio economic status is an important factor in examining the intricacies of partnerships more broadly. Although socioeconomic status was not a key focus of this study, it is relevant in the broader sense of understanding the factors that impact partnerships. Factors affecting partnerships, such socioeconomic status, are discussed in more detail in section 2.3.4.

Daniel et al. (2016) and Wilder (2014) confirmed that limitations in research around collaborative practice are often a result of inconsistent application of fundamental terms when researching and discussing the nature of the collaborations themselves. Their research suggests, then, that it is difficult to make generalisations about the factors affecting the success of collaborative partnerships when research definitions are inconsistent. Returning to the overall concept that parental involvement leads to improved student success, understanding the type of success and the nature of the collaborations that best foster that success is key to understanding collaborative partnerships on a deeper level.

### **2.3.3 The complexity of partnerships**

The importance of collaborative partnerships with families has been well established. Partnerships are effective when relationships are built on mutual trust, two-way communication and shared goals (Douglass, 2011; Rouse, 2012a). According to research by Douglass (2011), key dimensions in positive partnerships include: shared power, reciprocity, responsiveness and positivity. Douglass' (2011) study on partnerships in the early years' setting found that organisational structure and bureaucracy within settings have direct implications on the quality of partnerships. Findings from studies such as Douglass (2011); Dunst (2002), and Rouse (2012b) suggest that the key to achieving partnerships that engage partners in shared power, reciprocity, responsiveness and positivity lies in all stakeholders understanding their role in the partnerships, its value and its implications.

The teacher as expert has long been the basis for understanding the views of many families in early childhood (Hadley & Rouse, 2018). Historically, partnerships in early childhood settings position the teacher as expert with limited input from families (Hadley, 2014). More recently, and with the shift in policy, families are being recognised for their contribution and are referred to as "children's first and most influential educators" EYLF (Department of Education

Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 5). A paradigm shift has seen the EYLF and NQS reposition parents, acknowledging them for the role they play and positioning them as the experts on their child (Einarsdottir & Jónsdóttir, 2019; Hadley, 2014; Rouse & Hadley, 2018). The changing landscape of parents being recognised as first teachers (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012) has required educators to view partnerships through a new lens, one that encourages families as active participants and contributors (Einarsdottir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). This new narrative requires educators to seek input and contribution from families on both curriculum and governance and improvement plans (Einarsdottir & Jónsdóttir, 2019; Rouse & Hadley, 2018). Educators are now required to seek input from families on governance requirements such as the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which is a requirement for all settings under the NQS (ACECQA, 2012) (refer to section 2.2.5). The paradigm shift in how families are positioned within partnerships is particularly relevant in this research as findings examine and discuss how educators are attempting to involve families in curriculum decisions and support them in their parenting role.

The Australian ECEC policy affirms the notion that collaborative partnerships are important to overall success, as has been discussed in the literature already provided (section 2.2). As established, Quality Area Six under the NQS is specifically focused on partnerships with families.

Standard 6.1: Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained

Standard 6.2: families are supported in their parenting role, and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected

(ACECQA, 2012, section 6).

The language in standard 6.2 “families are supported in their parenting role” (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 12) and how this appears to be interpreted by many in the field positions educators as the experts on parenting and families as one of help seeker (Rouse & Obrien, 2017). Importantly, Rouse and Obrien (2017) point out that there is a disparity in the language of partnerships that is present in the guiding documents of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards. While the EYLF uses terms such as "value, share and trust" (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 12), the NQS uses terms such as "involved, effective enrolment and contribute" (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 139). Furthermore, Rouse and Obrien (2017) assert that “this language does not reflect the language of partnerships as being mutual or reciprocal” (p. 46). Consequently, Rouse (2012b) and Rouse and Obrien (2017) assert that the language in NQS Standard 6.2 (Standard 6.2: Families are supported in their parenting role, and their values and beliefs about child-rearing are respected, ACECQA, 2012, p. 139) disempowers parents, and promotes a deficit view of families (Sime & Sheridan, 2014). This notion of educators as the authority and the wise providers of parenting advice creates a power dynamic, positioning families as needed recipients of this advice, and does not encourage equal power and contribution as partners in education. Educators' pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical practices have sometimes been seen as superior and prioritised over families' informal and anecdotal knowledge of their child (Einarsdottir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). Furthermore, Brooker (2010) asserts that there is a tendency to favour the educator who is the professional by virtue of holding the early childhood qualification, and therefore the holder of knowledge. However, Brooker (2010) also juxtaposes this in cases where families who view themselves as professionals hold little or no value of the early childhood qualification itself, and therefore the knowledge of the educator. Consequently, there appears to be a disparity between the ways in which families are being positioned (deficit

model) and the contributions they are being asked to make as equal partners in education. To summarise, families are being asked to contribute to shared curriculum decisions, which requires specific and complex professional knowledge, yet they are being positioned as requiring educators' support in their parenting role. Compounding this paradigm shift in the nature of collaborative partnerships is that of standard 6.1 and 6.2 being measured and assessed under the NQS as a demonstration of quality in early childhood education and care. Thus, educators are pressured into seeking ways of demonstrating and providing evidence of their collaborative practices for inclusion of families, and receive an assessment and rating judgment for this behaviour (refer to section 2.2.5). Consequently, collaborative partnerships with families under the Australian policy reforms are complex and multifaceted. The following section will provide a discussion on the diverse needs of families and, therefore, the complexities of collaborative partnerships under the NQS and EYLF in ECEC.

#### **2.3.4 The diverse needs of families**

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) explicitly posits that educators must meet the needs of all children and families yet, approaches to, and the requirement of, collaborative partnerships remain the same for all families. In other words, educators must develop collaborative partnerships with all families regardless of the consideration that all families' needs are different and, therefore, the partnerships themselves may be different. The diverse nature of families within early years' settings in Australia requires consideration when establishing collaborative partnerships. Although the diversity and needs of families in settings differ, the approaches and reasoning behind partnerships remain relatively the same. Families' views on the importance and requirements of these partnerships appear limited and not present in current policy or approaches (Daniel et al., 2016; Ishimaru, 2019). A study by Rouse and O'Brien (2017) found that although educators often believe that they have established

collaborative partnerships with families, this belief is not always consistent with a family's perception. They assert that mutuality and reciprocity are lacking in collaborative partnerships and affirm that families often require different things from partnerships. Research conducted by Petrie and Holloway (2006) examined the differing expectations of mothers on the role of childcare and partnerships with education settings. They found that mothers from lower socioeconomic statuses seemed to seek out social networks for parenting support, whereas mothers from higher socioeconomic statuses sought socialisation for their child as they felt they could seek support from their own networks. Considering the findings from Petrie and Holloway (2006) in relation to the NQS Standard 6.2: families are supported in their parenting role, it appears that lower socioeconomic families were seeking support in their parenting role while higher socioeconomic families were confident in their parenting abilities. Therefore, understanding the nature of the elements that affect partnerships and the expectations of partnerships is crucial in terms of establishing effective collaborative partnerships. The notion of diverse families requiring different outcomes from educational partnerships is particularly relevant in terms of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families. Hadley (2014) investigated the different expectations of early childhood education and care of educators and CALD families. In the research, each family was asked to rate a series of prompts from most to least important in terms of education and care for children. Findings showed a disparity between family expectations and the views of educators in what is most important. Hadley (2014) also compared levels of communication between educators and families and found that parents' perceptions of how effective communication was differed between educators and families; families believed there was less communication than was perceived by the educator. Furthermore, two educators in the (Hadley, 2014) study proposed that families were simply not interested in being involved in partnerships. Consequently, Hadley asserts that:

When this attitude is compared to the current literature concerning the homogenised approach to parent involvement and partnerships, the question one needs to ask is: are parents not interested; or do they not value the way they can be involved; or do they not know how to be involved; or does the teacher not know how to facilitate the relations in a way that is respectful and inclusive? (p. 97).

Findings in the Hadley (2014) study suggest that educators and families do not hold a shared understanding of collaborative partnerships and that an approach that is not inclusive of the diversity of families is unlikely to assist in the development of authentic partnerships. Similarly, research by Brooker (2010) indicates that understanding and respecting cultural and societal differences of families is paramount in establishing collaborative partnerships. Careful consideration of the diverse needs of families and what they require from a collaborative partnership is crucial.

The expectations which underpin the success or failure of such relationships may have their origins in the class and cultural habits of the participants: not simply in beliefs about child-rearing practice, but also in larger assumptions about values, identity, role and status. (Brooker, 2010, p. 185)

It has been established that there is a range of factors that influence collaborative partnerships, likely due to the diverse nature of families. Although researchers such as Epstein (1987) and Borgonovi and Montt (2012) indicate that collaborative partnerships do improve overall outcomes for children, the variables influencing the partnerships themselves remain relatively limited in research (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Recent policy reform in Australia has seen the introduction of initiatives that mandate partnerships with the assumption that these will have a positive impact on a wider social scale, yet it is unclear if the diversity of families has been taken into consideration in reforms such as the EYLF and NQS, standard 6.2. Variables such

as socioeconomic status, educational background and cultural background (Hadley, 2014; Jaynes, 2010, 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2007) as outlined in 2.3.2 affirm that there are a range of factors that impact the quality of collaborations and the implications of these on the success of the partnerships themselves. Consequently, variables have the potential to influence both the perception of the importance of partnerships and the overall success of the partnership. It is well understood that collaborative partnerships are complex and multifaceted (Hadley, 2014; Jaynes, 2010; Pomerantz et al., 2007), which makes incorporating all possible variables problematic, and outside the scope of this study. However, understanding the variables that impact both the collaborations themselves, and the successes, is significant for children, families and educators.

As established, collaborative partnerships are featured heavily in the Australian ECEC policy. As previously stated, the literature on collaborative partnerships indicates that they can have a positive impact on overall student achievement, yet limited in the research are the specificities of the partnerships themselves. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships within Australian policy appears without consideration of these specificities and the diverse nature of families. The inclusion of collaborative partnerships within Australian policy is underpinned by social investment theory, whereby investing in the early years produces economic returns. The following section provides a discussion on the reasoning behind the goal of establishing collaborative partnerships in the Australian policy context, interrogating the concept of social investment for economic return, and the notion of what constitutes quality within ECEC.

## **2.4 Quality and social investment: the cost-benefit analysis**

Globally, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been at the forefront of many government policy reforms for the last decade (Bown, 2014; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Fenech, 2011; Hunkin, 2018; Lloyd & Penn, 2014). Central to this policy reform has been the potential

of family involvement in contributing to school improvement and overall outcomes for all (Daniel, 2016). The Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards were introduced to early years settings Australia wide with an increased focus on educator accountability and outcomes-based achievements as a social investment strategy (Adamson & Brennan, 2014). It is for this reason that collaborative partnerships with families feature heavily in Australian policy reforms.

Such policy reforms have largely been driven by the premise that social investment strategies such as focusing on education and employment rather than welfare are, in fact, investments that will bring economic returns (Ball, 2012; Productivity Commision, 2007). Social investment refers to policy and strategies that promote education and growth and boost human capital, for the purposes of an increase in productivity (Adamson & Brennan, 2014). Research supports the notion that investing in the early years of education is financially beneficial due to increased productivity and economic benefits in later life (Ishimaru, 2019). However, this approach positions ECEC as a market commodity for governments to control, standardise, regulate and champion for greater economic returns. Furthermore, at its core is the assumption that ECEC services can “maximise human capital” (Hunkin, 2018, p. 443) for future economic returns whilst aiming to ensure that social disadvantage is reduced. This view is supported by researchers such as Moss (2016) and Hunkin (2018), who critique this market approach to ECEC and the associated narrative of quality, one that is driven simply by profitability imperatives and a focus on future-proofing economies:

In Australia, the recent National Quality Framework elevated early childhood policy in Australia from the margins as the lynchpin of a broader economic reform agenda. However, quality ECEC – what it is and does – is a complex, contestable notion that could be considered problematic for the sector to execute, particularly through market models of provision ... the discourse of quality has been tactically deployed in

Australian ECEC policy to realign quality ECE outcomes with educative outcomes, as a means for government to selectively grow and govern human capital. This positions quality as a high-stakes reform discourse for early childhood stakeholders, entwined with the expanded reach and intensification of selective, performance-related standards and incentives. (Hunkin, 2018, p. 443)

### **2.4.1 The neoliberal approach**

The discussion on neoliberalism is important in terms of this study as the requirement for educators to collaborate with families is driven by the Australian policy reform which is grounded in a neoliberalist framework, one which is underpinned by economic returns (Hunkin, 2016a; Smith et al., 2016). Recognising that early childhood is a crucial time in overall development, according to Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), investing in early childhood to build capacity has become a focus for policymakers. Scholars such as Hunkin (2016a); Lloyd and Penn (2014); Mahon (2010); Moss (2014); Olssen and Peters (2005); Penn (2000) and Smith et al. (2016), assert that policy based on investment for the intention of return is grounded in a neoliberalist framework. According to Olssen and Peters (2005):

In neoliberalism, the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur ... this means that for neoliberal perspectives, the end goals of freedom choice and consumer sovereignty, competition, and individual initiatives, as well as those of compliance and obedience, must be constructions of the state. (p. 315)

Smith et al. (2016) discuss reforms in education as being neoliberal, where the influential driver of investment in education is based on the outputs from the investment. According to Smith et al. (2016), "under neoliberal policy, capital is understood through a lens of

productivity, performance, and profit, with human capital comprising the individual and what benefits the individual is to the economic good of a nation" (p. 124). Likewise, Rouse and Hadley (2018) discuss recent policy reform in Australia as framed within this neoliberal thinking, resulting in the NQS and EYLF. Accordingly, the human capital or neoliberalist approach positions health, education, and similar social welfare policies as a means of enhancing long-term economic productivity and crucial to children's optimal development outcomes. Smith et al. (2016) argue that current policy approaches that are based on quality are privileged and do not take into account the diverse backgrounds of children and families. They assert that the NQS are underpinned by policy rhetoric that speaks to human capital theory through the provision of early childhood education and care, which is measured, assessed, and ultimately effects pedagogical practice. Smith et al. (2016) reject the policy approaches as being 'one size fits all' approaches to quality and critique that gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are invisible in the assumption that all children provided with quality early childhood education and care will have equal opportunities to be successful in later life.

According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015), the Australian early childhood reform agenda rhetoric is grounded in an economist framework of productivity, as evidenced in the Productivity Commission Report (2006) which aligns early childhood and children's achievement with links to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). Consequently, the focus of the reform agenda is grounded in ensuring children develop the appropriate literacy and numeracy skills required to become productive citizens. The concept of social investment (Adamson & Brennan, 2014) by means of policy reforms in ECEC was aimed at increasing literacy and numeracy skills, which have been proven to increase productivity and outcomes in later years (*The Australian Economy Needs an Education Revolution*, 2007). Increasing access to ECEC and supporting families in their role as parents are all factors in social

investment and the associated policy reforms when viewed through a neoliberalist approach (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

In order to further interrogate the regulatory policy reform and the connection to human capital and social investment, the following section provides a discussion on the changing ECEC landscape and how it is dominated by neoliberal policy based on profitability imperatives.

### **2.4.2 The changing landscape: neoliberalism and social investment**

In 2007, the newly elected Labor Government began the overhaul of the education revolution as promised in the election campaign. Subsequently, the policy brief '*The Australian Economy Needs an Education Revolution*' (Rudd & Smith, 2007) was born to drive the agenda of education reforms. The education revolution was sparked by findings from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) whose findings promoted that investing in education was economically beneficial in productivity, and therefore the overall country's prosperity. This is further supported in the Australian Government's Productivity Commission Report (2007):

Early childhood, education, skills, and workforce development policies could boost participation by 0.7 percentage points, and productivity by up to 12 percent by 2030. This corresponds to an increase in GDP of around 2.2 percent, or around \$25 billion in today's dollars. (p. 19)

Consequently, the Labor Prime Minister at the time enacted policy reform that would overhaul the education system based on this premise. In an address to the Melbourne Education Research Institute in 2007, the then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said, "Education is the engine room of the economy. Education is about fairness. Education is the pathway to prosperity"

(Rudd, 2007, p. 2). This address signalled the beginning of education reforms and the introduction of quality initiatives throughout Australia.

The introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) was the beginning of policy change, including new national standards, the first national curriculum document (EYLF), and the enactment of the Education and Care Services National Law (Bown, 2014). What this policy meant in practice was that quality assurance in the ECEC sector was now mandated by law and that educators needed to align standards and curriculum outcomes to meet the needs of all children and families. Establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships with families enshrined a legally mandated requirement for early childhood educators, with compliance being measured against the National Quality Standards and Early Years Learning Framework outcomes. These initiatives were implemented in a bid to improve quality in early childhood education and care as a means of social investment for future generations. Investing in the early years has been seen as a step towards social investment and preparing rather than re-pairing both individuals and future economies (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012).

This is relevant in terms of this research as many of the reforms included in policy are aimed at collaborative partnerships with families under the assumption that engaging with families will have socially beneficial consequences in terms of investment and return. Investing in early childhood education as a means of economic future-proofing (Hunkin, 2018) goes beyond providing quality early childhood education for children to incorporating concepts of whole family and parenting support through mandated partnerships in education settings.

According to Adamson and Brennan (2014); Hunkin (2018) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015), this paradigm shift in education, driven by social investment theory, has seen the

introduction of outcomes-based assessments in early childhood education that confuse the notion of quality.

### **2.4.3 Social Investment as policy**

The National Quality Standards and Early Years Learning Framework embed 'social investment' concepts in the requirement for educators to build collaborative partnerships with families in a bid to support their parenting role. The drive by the Australian Government to mandate collaboration and parenting support through the NQS and EYLF could be considered more about preparing instead of re-pairing and future-proofing economic productivity, rather than authentic practices that truly improve outcomes for children and families (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Morel et al., 2012).

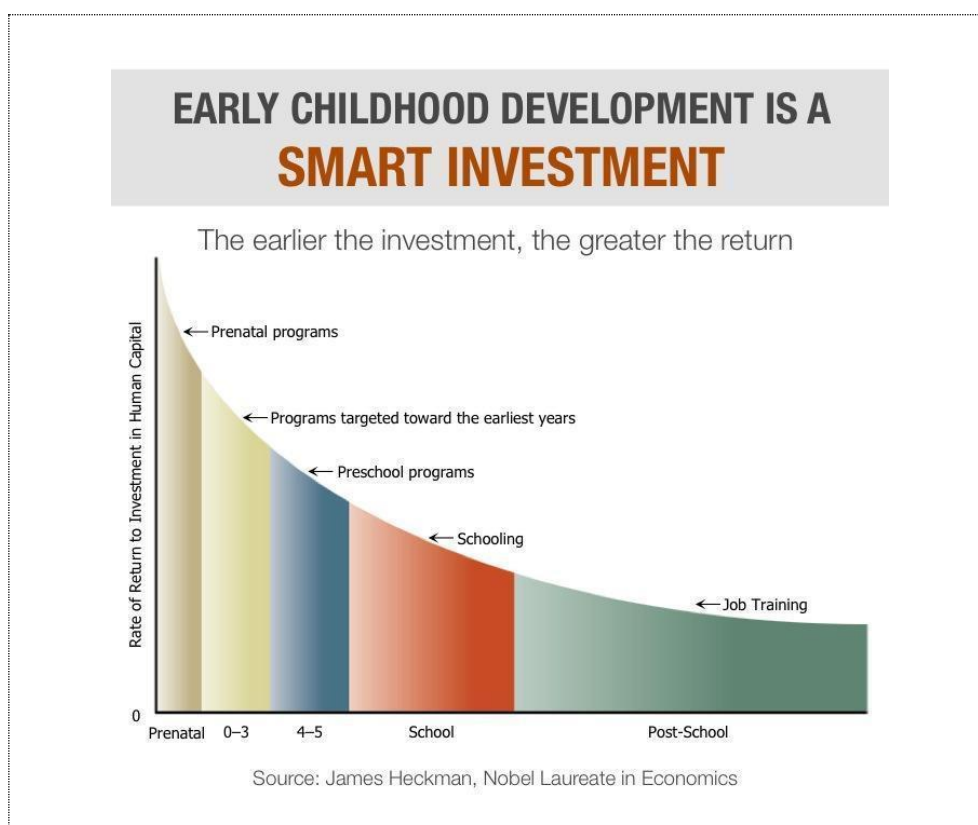
Consequently, National Quality Standard 6, element 6.2, which identifies supporting parents in their parenting role, is a prime example of how this smart investment ideology is represented in current policy. As part of this process and related to accountability, the push for educators to build collaborative partnerships with families is based upon the assumption that families seek such partnerships and that the partnerships will, in fact, benefit families and society, thus ensuring that the investment in early childhood is worth the cost. Therefore, policy reform enacted by the Australian Government highlights collaborative partnerships as essential in early childhood education with the intention of these partnerships being driven by economic returns. It is then important to consider the intent of the reforms (and therefore collaborative partnerships) from an economic standpoint, one where governments gain from increased profit both from ECEC participation rates, but also from return on investment in future generations.

As established, Australian policy reforms have been based on the assumption that investing in the early years produces economic benefits. In large part, this is due to the assumption that investment in early childhood education and care maximises economic potential when children

have access to quality education and care (Heckman, 2012; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Adamson and Brennan (2014) and Ball (2012), assert that investment in early childhood education as an economic quality assurance measure has coined a new phrase, ‘edu-business’. According to Heckman (2012), investing in early childhood yields social rewards and financial returns. Figure 8 depicts the ‘Smart Investment’ theory, commonly known as the Heckman Equation, which endorses the notion that early investment produces the greatest returns to social capital (Heckman, 2012).

**Figure 8: The Heckman Equation**



(Heckman, 2012)

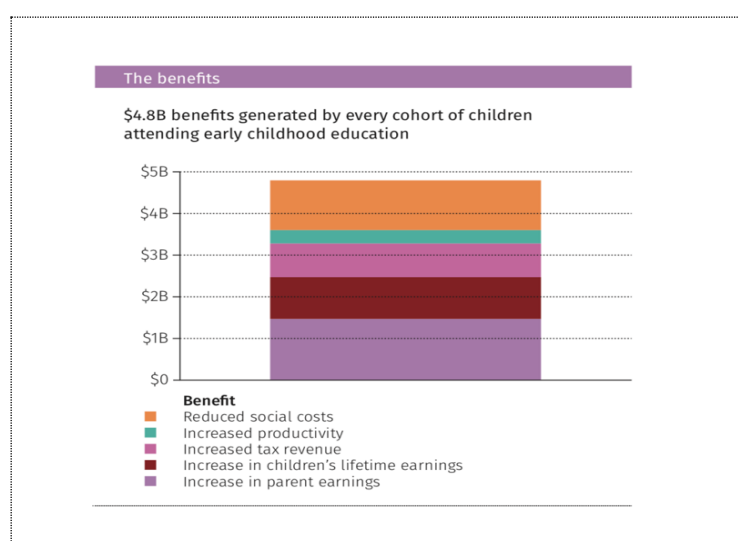
Similarly, a recent report by The Front Project (2019) presented Australia's first Economic Analysis of early childhood education in the year before school. The research looked at the cost and benefit analysis of early childhood education in the Australian system, which provides

kindergarten programs in the year before school. The analysis found that the investment of finances that prompted reforms in ECEC in Australia has brought significant returns. According to The Front Project (2019), "The evidence indicates for every dollar invested now, Australia receives \$2 back over a child's life" (The Front Project, 2019, p. 4). Figure 9 indicates the ways in which the benefits have been attributed. The proposed benefits are centred around four themes:

1. Children become confident learners, prepared for school and are put on a path to better educational achievement and therefore higher earnings throughout their life
  2. Parents have the opportunity to return to work or increase their hours, increasing workforce participation
  3. Government benefits from increased taxation as a result of higher workforce participation and increased taxation now, and the higher earnings of today's children in years to come
  4. Business benefits from a more educated, efficient and adaptable workforce
- (The Front Project, 2019, p. 4)

Although The Front Project (2019) analysis does mention children as confident learners, absent from the discussion is the value of children as individuals or childhood more broadly.

**Figure 9: The benefits of investing in early childhood education**



The Front Project, 2019 (p. 4)

The assumption is made here that quality early childhood education and care services can assist those in social disadvantage as well as maximise human capital into the future (Hunkin, 2016a, 2018). Prevalent in the Australian policy reforms that have been driven by social investment is the term ‘quality’. The notion of quality has been a fundamental driver in education reform and policy change globally (Hunkin, 2018), yet no clear definition describes what quality in early childhood is. The following section will problematise the concept of quality and the impacts of a compliance culture.

#### **2.4.4 Problematising the notion of quality**

Researchers have critically interrogated the notion of quality in early childhood education and care for a substantial number of years (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Dalli et al., 2011; Fenech, 2011; Hunkin, 2018; Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Moss, 2014). Fenech (2011); Hunkin (2018); and Rouse and Hadley (2018), problematise this discourse and question the rhetoric of quality, asking questions such as ‘Whose Quality is represented’ and ‘How is it being measured and assessed’? The debate around ‘quality’ is not based on the notion that the education and care sector do not provide the best outcomes for children, rather, that a singular

and standardised notion of quality that is measured and quantified can only be interpreted one way (Fenech, 2011; Hunkin, 2018). Rouse and Hadley (2018) assert that early childhood education and care in Australia is being hijacked by policy agenda in a bid to solve complex social problems, and that educators are now more accountable to assessed and measured outcomes rather than education and care.

The dictionary definition of quality is “the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). In early childhood settings, the term ‘quality’ is not so easily defined, yet prevalent in a range of guiding documents such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS). A universal definition or notion of quality is strongly rejected by postmodernist researchers who argue that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to quality marginalises and does not allow for multiple perspectives (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Lloyd & Penn, 2014). Furthermore, according to Moss (2016), this way of thinking about quality as a universal measure is naïve and reductionist. They argue that the belief that a technical fix of quality ECEC can solve deep structurally ingrained inequality is not achievable in the practical sense. As established, this thinking was driven by what many refer to as neoliberalist thinking (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hunkin, 2018; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). It is this neoliberalist thinking that has resulted in policies that are grounded in economic productivity, whereby children are seen as a commodity for investment to ultimately yield return.

Early work by Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) began the critical interrogation and discussion regarding the concept of quality in early childhood education settings. Moss (2013) asserts that “quality is presented as a universal truth that is value and culture free and applicable equally anywhere in the field under consideration; in short, quality is a decontextualised concept” (Moss, 2013, p. 99). Long before the introduction of the NQS and EYLF in Australia, Dahlberg et al. (1999) challenged the notion of a preconceived and standardised approach to

quality. They assert that this quality discourse, which was emerging globally, was based upon a universal one size fits all approach to early childhood that lacked political, cultural and values-based approaches. Dahlberg et al. (1999) concluded that one of the key fundamental problems with this dominant discourse of quality was that it was a technical language expressed through measured and assessed performance targets, outcomes and standardised goals. They asserted that the discourse of quality in early childhood education is not inclusive of concepts such as diversity, multiple perspectives, subjectivity and contextual specificity. Dahlberg et al. (1999) considered that this language of quality lacked consideration of the perspective of – what do we really mean by quality? They assert that the quality discourse had marginalised discussion on specificities and was overpowered by a focus on the compliance of quality through the identification of standardised measurements. They contend that the fundamental problem with the concept of quality is that it is subjective. This is discussed by Moss (2013) when he stated:

How is the essential quality of a product to be defined? How is the quest for permanent and stable criteria of rationality to be conducted? The specification of criteria of quality is undertaken by a particular group whose authority to specify comes from various sources. (p. 99)

This thinking supports the earlier work done by Dahlberg et al. (1999) who asserted that quality is subjective and can only be defined by the individual “quality child care is to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder – and that beholder can be anyone or any group from among a range of stakeholders” (p. 172). Consequently, striving to achieve a measure of quality in terms of ECEC is, therefore, a futile task, yet is it prevalent in almost all guiding literature and policy in ECEC in Australia.

According to Evers (1997), the emergence of the quality discourse in education is the result of its appropriation from the business world. It represents a focused shift from professionals' individual judgments to a more measured and quantifiable assessment:

... under the influence of massive privatisation programmes and the search for cuts in social welfare budgets, a particular discourse on quality has become increasingly prominent, one which relies very much on a business-based approach ... The concepts coming from the market sector clearly prevail ... in line with the fact that the global ideological trends have shifted towards an increasing impact from market liberalism. (Evers, 1997, p. 1)

Therefore, it could be said that the neoliberalist underpinning of the policy documents that guide ECEC practice in Australia has been derived from the push for standardised assessment measures to ultimately increase productivity. This is further supported by Hunkin (2016b) who posits that the focus of governments has seen the repositioning of education over care, and changed the nature of early childhood where academic abilities are measured and assessed, ultimately questioning the intention and purpose of early childhood education within Australia.

Australian policy depicts a welfare state that perceives early childhood education as human capital, a return on investment (Hunkin, 2018). This neoliberalist ideology perceives children as a commodity for future return rather than individuals. It could be questioned that the dubious economic arguments that govern the positioning of ECEC and impose measured standards, outcomes and compliance have created a dialogue that says nothing about education and care. What is early childhood education and care for? Is it more than economic capacity building? The policy documentation would affirm that the quality discourse around ECEC in Australia is focused on productivity of the workforce rather than the quality of the education offering itself. The quality discourse underpinned by a social investment narrative has had an impact on

the ECEC sector, which will be further discussed in the following section. Furthermore, a discussion on reconceptualising quality moving beyond quality is presented in Chapter 4, section 4.8, alongside a discussion on the findings of this research.

### **2.4.5 Quality and impact on the early childhood sector**

Realisations about the importance of early childhood education is not a new concept to ECEC educators, who have long seen the importance of investing in early childhood education and care (Rouse & Obrien, 2017). However, it was an increasing proportion regarding the impact of privatisation within the sector and identified problematic issues with quality assurance within the field, which acted as the catalyst to apply pressure to the government to enact a quality overhaul and national reforms in the sector (Bown, 2014). The focus on quality in early childhood education and care has indeed had a significant impact on early childhood educators within the sector in Australia.

The notion of quality, though, in early childhood, remains complex (Hunkin, 2018), and it can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, which makes reform challenging. The inability to define and articulate overall and particular dimensions of quality in early childhood education and care, and the differing definitions of quality that exist, were referred to as being ‘rhizomatic’ by Logan and Sumsion (2010). A rhizomatic structure can be explained as a complex connection of links, or a diverse web-like structure that extends in all directions (Deleuze, Guattari, & Massumi, 2013; Logan & Sumsion, 2010).

Research by Logan and Sumsion (2010) investigated educators’ perspectives about quality and how they made provision for these in their setting. The research asked six educators what quality meant to them and how this was enacted in their service. The findings of the study revealed that educators often struggled to define quality as they felt it was personal and subjective. This then cast doubts over the potential value of the reforms, which had quality as

a focus. Furthermore, research conducted with educators in the United Kingdom, by Cottle and Alexander (2014), investigated educators' perceptions of quality in the context of relationships with families. Their research affirmed that narrative from educators' is one that values parent partnerships as fundamental to the role of educators. However, according to Cottle and Alexander (2014), comments from educators' also uncovered the complex nature of relationships between educators and parents in the context of developing shared understandings within policy and discourse.

Similarly, in a review of the literature on quality in early childhood, as presented by Fenech, Harrison, Sumsion, Press, and Bowes (2008), it was found that in the 200 articles reviewed, only one included educators' perspective on quality. Therefore, the introduction of the NQS and EYLF as a measure of quality seems problematic when, in fact, the definition of quality is not inclusive of multiple perspectives and not easily understood.

Discussions on frameworks for interpreting quality suggest that the NQS, in comprising seven quality areas and thirty-three standards, can be interpreted in a modernist framework that is measured and quantified (Fenech, 2011; Logan et al., 2012; Logan & Sumsion, 2010). According to Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, and Abbott-Shim (2000), and Logan and Sumsion (2010), the modernist perspective on quality is considered observable and measured with statements that reflect societal prescribed norms. Therefore, the presence of thirty-three standards that are assessed and measured provides a basis for the assumption that the NQS is underpinned by a modernist framework. Therefore, according to Logan and Sumsion (2010), if one takes the view that the concept of quality is rhizomatic in structure, it makes it difficult to articulate quality against a framework of accountability. In other words, how can educators be assessed against standards to measure quality when the definition of quality itself is not well understood? Furthermore, the assessment and rating of early childhood services against the NQS as a reflection of quality appears problematic more broadly.

Sims and Waniganayake (2015) refer to the creation of a culture of compliance as a result of the quality assurance processes enforced under the National Quality Standards. They assert that the top-down approach by governments to ensure quality pressures educators to simply be compliant, resulting in a loss of educators' autonomy, which could ultimately be seen as “anti-quality” (p. 333), and not in the best interests of the profession. Similarly, Osgood (2006) asserts that “neoliberal policy reforms have resulted in greatly reduced autonomy as a consequence of the regulatory gaze and accompanying directives and diktats” (Osgood, 2006, p. 6). Therefore, what has been created is a compliance culture driven by quality reform, which sees educators concerned with accountability against standards and elements. Hence, this changing focus may result in new ways of working with more focus on 'evidencing quality' rather than simply 'enacting quality', which was also supported by Logan and Sumsion (2010) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015). Sims and Waniganayake (2015) argue that this will result in the creation of a compliant citizenry:

- Compliant early childhood educators who focus on how to meet quality accreditation requirements (and not critique the standards they are required to address);
- Compliant children who receive learning experiences proscribed by the official definitions and understandings of quality: students who ‘learn what will be on the test rather than seeking answers to questions that cry out for answers’ (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, p. 182)

(Sims & Waniganayake, 2015, p. 334)

A consequence of a compliant citizenry, as discussed by Sims and Waniganayake (2015), is the loss of educator autonomy and a de-professionalisation of the role of educators within early childhood education. Similarly, this was supported by the National ECEC Workforce Study (Irvine, Thorpe, McDonald, Lunn, & Sumsion, 2016), which affirmed some educators were concerned over diminishing ability to exercise professional agency and autonomy. Sims and

Waniganayake (2015) argue that neoliberal approaches to reforms in early childhood in Australia dictate a compliant workforce which is solely focused on achieving imposed standards and outcomes of quality (instead of questioning the standards themselves), which results in a compliant citizenry incapable of reforming practices to fit with individual contexts across a diverse field:

It is our contention that, in this climate (shaped by political, public and media discourse), early childhood practitioners are losing the ability to engage in professional debate and are instead focusing on how to best be compliant. (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015, p. 338)

Consequently, it is likely that in an environment of accountability, a loss of educator autonomy and agency and the de-professionalisation of educators is the result.

As established, with the influences of quality misunderstood, implications for educators in the sector, then, are centred around meeting a prescribed notion of quality, balanced with their interpretation of quality based on contextually relevant judgment. As discussed by Sims and Waniganayake (2015), the culture of compliance as a result of the NQS de-professionalises educators, which further exacerbates the understanding of what quality is. Consequently, the implications of this culture and changes to the ways in which educators are influenced in their practice have the potential to shape future pedagogical practice.

Furthermore, the term ‘re-professionalisation’ has been used by researchers Williamson and Morgan (2009) and, more recently, by Torrance and Murphy (2017) to explain how education reforms in the education environment can shape pedagogical change. In relation to early childhood reforms, the term re-professionalisation could be explained by the imposed regulation of a predetermined notion of scripted quality that has diminished teachers' professional judgment with a regulatory system now controlling pedagogical practice. In other

words, a scripted compliance culture brought about by Australian policy reforms in early childhood education have changed the ways in which educators work, hence a change in pedagogical practice and a re-professionalisation of their practice. Therefore, changes to pedagogical practice concerning how educators are collaborating with families are likely to have been influenced by a culture of compliance. Therefore, an approach to early childhood education that is driven by a compliance culture where educators are focused on accountability of quality standards without questioning ‘whose quality?’ is likely to negatively influence pedagogical practice more broadly, contrary to the intent of the reforms. Consequently, the following section provides a discussion on re-imagining the narrative of quality to a space of meaning-making.

#### **2.4.6 Re-imagining the narrative of quality: meaning-making**

The ECEC reform agenda implemented over the past two decades in Australian ECEC contexts is grounded in neoliberalist ideology and driven by the narrative of quality and high returns on investment (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016; Hunkin, 2018; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). This section acknowledges that the term ‘quality’ has imbued ECEC, and provides a discussion on moving beyond quality.

Aligned to the position of Dahlberg (2016); Hunkin (2018); Jones et al. (2016) in interrogating the language of quality is, in fact, interrogating the neoliberalist agenda at its core. Dahlberg et al. (2007) identified that “we must go beyond the concept of quality” (p. 6) to a reconceptualised space with the new concept of meaning-making:

... meaning-making can be construed within the notion of evaluation, where it is implicated within an integral part of a democratic process of interpretation. As such, it is a process that involves making practice visible, and this subject to reflection,

dialogue, and argumentation leading to a judgment of value contextualised and provisional because it is always subject to contestation. (p. 9)

Likewise, Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) challenge the continual dominance of quality-centric language and encourage and assert that quality-centric language is pervasive and does not allow for alternative possibilities to be considered. They propose the creation of "niches for variations and alternative imaginings of quality" (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016, p. 55) where alternative imaginings can occur.

Furthermore, Ritchie (2016) presents the New Zealand context with similarity to that of Australia and proposes that the traditionally white, western, male-dominated paradigm of quality, which alleges to improve ECEC, is not helpful. She argues that a re-orientation towards qualities rather than quality is needed and would allow for the "opening up of spaces of divergence" (p. 78). Likewise, Nxumalo (2016) presents the "unsettling of dominant framings of quality" (p. 39) from the Canadian context in which she discusses her work as a pedagoga<sup>9</sup>, spurring different kinds of dialogue that are "always in motion" (p. 40) and reconceptualising meaning in articulating what is meant by quality practice. Consequently, it would appear that the dominant framing of quality throughout legislative documents and imposed standards is consistent throughout Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and is being contested and reconceptualised by a range of researchers.

As suggested (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016), the that narrative of quality needs to be replaced with a language that is inclusive of context and makes visible the meaning. For example, instead of asking for quality relationships, a language of meaning-making would articulate

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<sup>9</sup> The role of a pedagoga takes inspiration from Reggio Emilia, where in a bid to improve education program and practice a mentor provides support, challenging and enhancing educators' overall practice (Rinaldi, 2006).

what it is that is required of relationships – not quality relationships, but relationships that are caring, warm and inviting. This new language is specific and can be contextualised and reflected upon. When questioning the values and assumptions of what it is we believe about early childhood education and care, we create alternative ways of thinking. A dialogue that empowers educators to question ECEC as preparedness for the future labour market, embracing the here and now of early childhood. Therefore, creating an alternative language of quality – one that moves away from accountability and embraces a language of meaning and evaluation, one that is articulated directly and does not hide behind the notion of quality (Moss, 2016). According to Jones et al. (2016) and Moss (2016), when we challenge the term ‘quality’ we unpack what it is we are truly asking for from ECEC. What is it that we want from children, educators, curriculums or families when we say quality ECEC? This reconceptualising the narrative of quality and naming the practice or qualities we value is more helpful than a system where there is only one view or answer to what is seen, measured and assessed as quality.

It is important to note that in re-imagining the narrative of quality, it is not that we do not want the best educators and programs for children, it is simply pushing back against a standardised term that suggests regulation and accountability. As Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) assert:

... the stranglehold that the notion of quality has in early childhood education is undeniable. In essence, the prevailing discourse supports the idea that everyone, from families to educators, policymakers, researchers, and politicians, wants high-quality programs and the best for early childhood education for all young children. However, the pursuit of quality has become increasingly associated with techniques of control and calculation, technology, and measurement. (p. 55)

Therefore, a reconceptualisation of quality discourse would enable values, beliefs and goals to be better articulated. It would allow for multiple perspectives to be embraced and would move away from a culture of compliance (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

Likewise, Evans (2016) approaches quality to challenge the predictability of fixed outcomes by embracing a new dialogue of meaning-making; "Meaning-making creates spaces to challenge the status quo, creating the potential for new ways of understanding experiences and happening in the early years" (Evans, 2016, p. 65).

Similarly, in a search for 'otherness', Duhn and Grieshaber (2016, p. 55) discuss the often meaningless pursuit for quality that unless re-imagined is unobtainable. They challenge this pursuit:

... what are the tools available to us in Australia right now for making practice visible and opening it up for dialogue that encourages diverse interpretations? How can we make the familiar just unfamiliar enough so that the imagination is stirred into engagement with other ways of seeing and doing? (p. 55)

Consequently, in new ways of seeing and doing, Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) encourage the use of "thick description" (p. 56) as a meaning-making alternative, making visible the possibilities. Moreover, Dahlberg (2016) and Moss (2016) advocate a move away from neoliberal constructs of quality as a universal truth based on standardised outcomes to a space of meaning-making that allows: multiple perspectives; values and ethics; and political and value-based judgments that enable the reconceptualisation of what we believe of early childhood education and care. Dahlberg (2016) asserts that challenging the predictability and control of quality would allow for a re-imagining of new possibilities based on cultural, political and ethical ways of thinking. An alternative narrative is required – a changing landscape of collaborative practice that allows for new potentialities. This could be enacted by

Dahlberg's (2019) notion of "Walking on Two Legs" – one which continues to meet imposed standards, the other that embraces new ways of knowing and doing that allows new potentiality in terms of collaborative practice.

According to Jones et al. (2016), there is a significant challenge in reconceptualising the narrative of quality:

... the challenge of putting new materialism and post-humanism to work requires significant ontological and epistemological shifts. Nevertheless, it is only by shifting the ground on which specific knowledge claims are made that we can potentiate a different logic, which, in turn, can alter both thinking and, importantly, practice. (p. 4)

Consequently, reconceptualising the narrative of quality meaning-making may impact educators' pedagogical practice more broadly. It is for this reason that this research has further explored the ways in which pedagogical practice in collaborative partnerships has been shaped or changed by social media (acknowledging that evidencing collaborative partnerships is likely the result of the quality discourse under the NQS) within the early childhood education and care sector. Having already discussed collaborative practice, policy reforms within Australia, the notion of quality as being subjective, and the reconceptualisation of quality more broadly, the following section will explore the emergence of new technologies, social media generally, and social media in the education sector.

## **2.5 New technologies**

Social media as an educational environment is a rapidly emerging phenomenon. Technology has significantly changed the way in which people interact and communicate (Ahmed et al., 2019). Although people have been increasingly using the internet to communicate since the late 1980s, the rise in the use of social networking sites/social media for communicating has

rapidly increased over the last decade, marking a paradigm shift in the way people communicate (Ahmed et al., 2019; Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, & Third, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Rodrigues, Fonseca, & Preguiça, 2018). According to the Australian Government Department of Finance (2019):

The use of the internet as a platform for collaboration is already transforming our economy and our lives. Whole industries and sectors are being refashioned by this phenomenon of Web 2.0. Citizens are being empowered to express themselves, organise, and collaborate in myriad new ways. (para. 1)

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media has been enabled by the innovative development in technology and the opportunities provided by changes in Web 2.0 technologies, which became prominent in the early 2000s. The Australian Government Department of Finance (2019) defines Web 2.0 as:

The tools of Web 2.0 include blogs, wikis, and social networking platforms. These tools enable communities of interest to develop rapidly to find people with local knowledge or technical expertise to build an understanding of issues and solve problems as they emerge. They enable communities to filter the torrent of information on the internet and identify the most useful parts of it. They enable us to find the most useful contributors in any given subject area, be they a world expert or someone possessing important local or ephemeral knowledge. (para. 2)

These Web 2.0 technologies have made information more readily available and changed the way people consume media at any place and time. Social media platforms incorporate a range of technologies that allow people to connect, share and produce content, allowing people to inform, interact, share and produce almost instantaneously (Ahmed et al., 2019). The functionality of social media environments has changed the way individuals communicate,

interact, share information and collaborate both personally and professionally (Chawinga & Zinn, 2016; Osatuyi, 2013). Commonly known social media platforms include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn and WhatsApp. Social media technologies are continually evolving with new functionalities rapidly emerging (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). According to Ahmed et al. (2019); Nielsen, Moll, Farrell, McDaid, and Hoban (2013) social media generally allows for users to share encounters as they happen (Instagram, Twitter) to share information and opinions (blogs, live streams, Facebook) and to communicate and collaborate in a shared space.

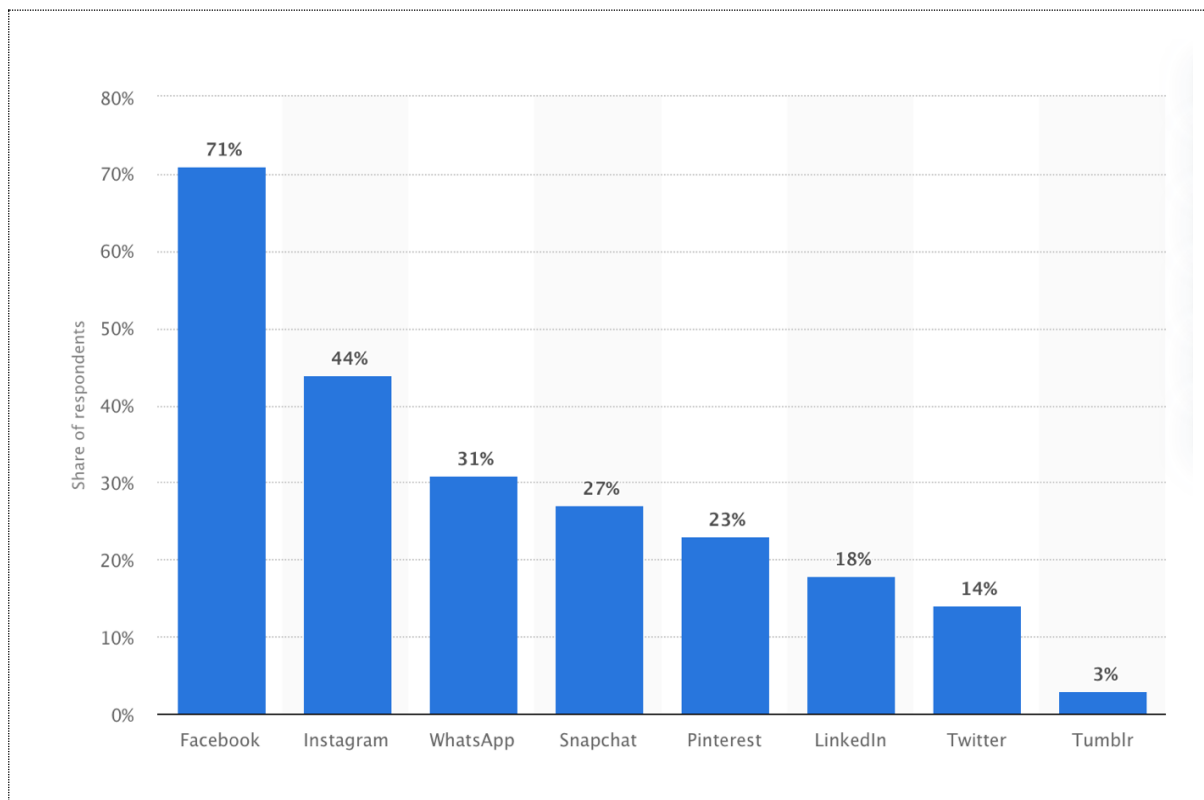
Karim and Gide (2017) and Brenner and Smith (2013) assert that social media use is growing exponentially. According to Smith (2020) and Perrin (2015), social media use is growing among all age groups and demographics, with young people remaining the largest consumers. The increased use of social media is relevant in the context of this study as educators perceived social media to be a useful forum for collaborating with time-poor families. Consequently, highlighting the prevalence of social media use provides context in this research. Recent statistics released by Smith (2020) found that :

- The internet has 4.54 billion users
- There are 3.725 billion active social media users
- Social media users grew by 328 million between October 2018 and October 2019
- Facebook adds 500,000 new users every day
- 74% of Facebook users check it every day

(para 1)

It is difficult to ascertain the exact social media membership numbers. However, according to recent figures published online by Smith (2020), active social media users increased by 6.1 per cent from April 2018–2019, with over 202 million users. Similarly, Hughes (2019) provided statistics on social media use per platform as outlined in Figure 10, which highlights that Facebook has the largest proportion of use. This is significant in this research as case study three investigates the use of Facebook to collaborate with families.

**Figure 10: Statistics on Australian social media use**



(Hughes, 2019, para.1)

The use of social media has become a regular part of everyday communication, with the vast majority of Australian users actively engaging daily (Collin et al., 2011; Karim & Gide, 2017; Smith, 2020). Georgescu and Popescul (2015) and Kapoor et al. (2018) proclaim that social media has become the new medium for communication and collaboration between people. Initially considered as a personal environment (Forsgren & Byström, 2018), social media can now be thought of as mainstream and has moved beyond use for the personal and is present in a range of professional, educational and workplace settings (Lam, Yeung, & Cheng, 2016).

According to Forsgren and Byström (2018); Kapoor et al. (2018); Ngai, Xiu, and Chau (2009), social media has fundamentally changed the way people communicate and presented new opportunities and challenges in business, education and people's private lives. Initially, social media was used for personal communication, staying in touch with friends and families, and sharing updates and photos (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). With social media use growing

exponentially across all demographics (Perrin, 2015; Smith, 2020), the use of social media has become more prevalent across areas such as business, education and government (Kapoor et al., 2018). Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2019); Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) posit that social media can be highly influential in a range of settings due to its user-generated content that incorporates opportunities for knowledge sharing, entrepreneurship, purchasing/selling and social influencing. Therefore, the functionality offered through social media has many advantages for business and education alike (Corral de Zubielqui, Fryges, & Jones, 2019; Georgescu & Popescu, 2015).

The use of social media has moved beyond that of personal use and is now also used as a marketing tool, to promote corporate identity, knowledge sharing, increase awareness, customer service and encourage communication (Ahmed et al., 2019; Fusi & Feeney, 2018; Lam et al., 2016). There is an emerging body of literature on social media that spans a range of fields such as technology, business and marketing, and education (Georgescu & Popescu, 2015; Kapoor et al., 2018; Shokri & Dafoulas, 2016). According to Lam et al. (2016), social media presents a platform for knowledge building, organisational learning, and experience sharing. Government organisations use social media platforms to enrich citizen awareness and inform policy directions (Osatuyi, 2013) while private businesses use social media to promote brand awareness, build sales and marketing and for customer service and feedback (Ngai et al., 2009). Whereas education environments have adopted social media to promote engagement and pedagogy in higher education learning environments (Kivunja, 2015; Mazman & Usluel, 2010).

Although the use of social media has increased exponentially over the past decade, according to Stich, Tarafdar, Stacey, and Cooper (2019) email remains the “most widely used medium of electronic communication” (p. 132). As email use is so prolific and part of almost every workplace (Stich et al., 2019), it cannot be excluded as a viable means of collaborating. In

regard to this study, the use of email has been included as a form of social media as educators within this research identified email as delivering similar functionality to that of other social media platforms when collaborating with families. Research around the use of email to collaborate is limited with current research focused on the challenges of managing and organising ever increasing email communication (Alibadi & Vidal, 2018; Stich et al., 2019). There appears a gap in the research regarding the use of email in collaborative partnerships.

With the benefits of social media use becoming more prevalent in a range of organisations (Kapoor et al., 2018), adopting social media to enhance outcomes in the education sector is emerging (Chawinga, 2017; Lemon, 2019). Having established that social media use in a range of settings has been gaining momentum, the following section will discuss the use of social media within the educational context.

### **2.5.1 Social media in education**

Social media platforms and capabilities are rapidly evolving. Research in the use of social media in higher education environments is developing with the impacts of social media use influencing pedagogy and practice (Kivunja, 2015; Lemon, 2019; Zachos, Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). According to Zachos et al. (2018), their review of seventy-seven articles examining the use of social media in higher education environments can be classified into four distinct categories:

- (a) the learning processes (support, educational processes, communication and collaboration enhancement, academic performance)
- (b) the users' personality profile and learning style
- (c) the social networks as online learning platforms (LMS – learning management system); and

(d) their use in higher education. (p. 2)

Zachos et al. (2018) findings assert that there was almost complete agreement that social media positively contributed to communication and cooperation within the educational environment. However, they also presented that there was some research indicating reluctance from teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches (Galagan, 2010) as well as research indicating concerns over students using social media to socialise rather than learn (Ainin, Naqshbandi, Moghavvemi, & Jaafar, 2015).

Additionally, research has focused on the opportunities social media may offer in terms of the educational context both formally (within the classroom) and informally (outside the classroom) (Brennan, 2003; Chawinga, 2017; Notley & Tacchi, 2005). According to Poore (2013), the functionality of social media that provides potential in the field of education is characterised by:

- participation
- communication
- collaboration
- networking
- sharing
- creativity
- interactivity and
- community building

Similarly, Seifert (2016) asserts that social media research in the context of higher education has focused on transformational practices to inform teaching within the student experience in relation to overall pedagogical practice and support for learning. Likewise, Lee and

McLoughlin (2011) describe a paradigm shift enabled by Web 2.0 and social media functionality as 'Pedagogy 2.0' and propose that this is a new self-directed and learner-centred model for education.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) are predominantly used as an online presence in most vocational and higher education spaces. However, emerging research is increasingly identifying functionalities and opportunities of using social media alongside LMSs. Connolly, Willis, and Lloyd (2019) investigated the use of Facebook alongside traditional LMS as a complementary tool in a vocational setting. They found that agreed benefits for students using the private Facebook site were: collaboration through the sharing of ideas, knowledge and resources; and increased communications with both peers and academics. Using Facebook to create a community of practice is also supported by Menzies, Petrie, and Zarb (2017), who assert that using Facebook alongside traditional pedagogies offers a collaborative learning environment that can be student-led and enables co-contribution to knowledge-building in a convenient and accessible way. Laserna and Miguel (2018) investigated the use of Facebook and Twitter among their students to monitor the sharing of resources, promotion of interest, and overall motivation related to linguistics and languages. Findings demonstrated an increase in students' use of both platforms, with Facebook users increasing from 198 to 377 and Twitter followers from 287 to 377. The increase in participation of students in both Twitter and Facebook platforms was understood as a positive indicator of interest and motivation, as were the qualitative results.

In like manner, research also points to the effective use of other social media applications such as WhatsApp (Barhoumi, 2015; Igbafe & Anyanwu, 2018). Igbafe and Anyanwu (2018) researched the use of WhatsApp as a tool to identify if its use enhanced or detracted from tertiary study. Their research focused on the use of WhatsApp in an educational context to see if engaging through WhatsApp ultimately enhanced or detracted from the learning experience.

Results of interviews with twenty students, examining their use of and interaction with educators via WhatsApp, indicated that WhatsApp does offer opportunities that enhance the learning experience. However, these advantages were centred around socialisation and building a community of learners. Findings indicated that engaging in conversations and sharing of resources via WhatsApp promoted attainment of knowledge; however, in contrast, students also reported that WhatsApp was a distractor and often diminished concentration on academic tasks. Accordingly, Igbafe and Anyanwu (2018) proclaim that social media platforms such as WhatsApp do offer opportunities to enhance the educational experience, but that lecturers' and students' capabilities of use may need to be enhanced in terms of the way they use the social media tool. In other words, although opportunities for positive use exist, students would need to overcome the distractors if the use of WhatsApp was to be complementary.

Similarly, Lemon (2019) embedded the use of Twitter in an initial teacher education arts curriculum to measure students' risk-taking in relation to their own arts education, focusing on confidence and self-efficacy. Students were asked to share via Twitter as they emerged as arts practitioners engaged in visible reflective practice, sharing, connecting and inquiring as their knowledge and confidence grew. Evidence suggested that although Twitter use provides a range of possibilities, including the enhanced capacity to be reflective in the context of arts education, users' lived experiences, knowledge of, and confidence with, social media platforms impacts overall success.

Likewise, research by Clarke (2018) focused on the use of social media in mentoring in a virtual space. Her work investigated the use of Facebook to mentor and deliver online professional development in the early years sector, and she asserted that there were new opportunities for learning enabled by the use of Facebook. Clarke (2018) contended that the ability to reach a mass audience at nil or minimal cost is a positive of mentoring via Facebook, yet also cautions that misinformation and alienation can be negative consequences of the use of Facebook for

mentoring activities. Similarly, Weigel, Weiser, Bales, and Moyses (2012) investigated the ways in which early childhood professionals accessed and used the internet for online learning. Their study examined educators' use of the internet, online preferences, and the impact of age, education, and familiarity with the internet on educators' internet habits. They found that the majority of early childhood professionals were sophisticated online users and that access to professional materials online were positively received.

The use of social media and new technologies in the field of early childhood education is developing (Fan & Yost, 2019; Sunderland & Speden, 2017). According to Barback (2013), the traditional means of documenting children's learning through portfolios and learning stories (Carr & Lee, 2012) is beginning to move online through the use of digital documentation (e-portfolios) and social media platforms and applications such as Storypark, Educa<sup>10</sup>, and Kinderloop<sup>11</sup>. According to Paige, Martin, Gerry, Joe, Shivaun and Denise (2018), e-portfolios are a purposeful collection of digitalised work that documents students' efforts, progress and achievement. In an early childhood context, e-portfolios allow hardcopy documentation such as observations, learning stories and written communications to be collected in an online space and shared in a virtual community or to individual families. Sunderland and Speden (2017) define virtual communities as a community of people who share common interests and ideas and collaborate together in a virtual space. Virtual communities can operate through social media applications such as Facebook, or software applications such as Storypark. According to Sunderland and Speden (2017), Storypark can be considered both an e-portfolio platform

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<sup>10</sup> Educa is a software application that provides private learning communities for early learning services, enabling digital documentation to be captured and shared. <https://www.geteduca.com/about/>

<sup>11</sup> Kinderloop is a software application that provides private learning communities for early learning services, enabling digital documentation to be captured and shared. <https://kinderloop.com>

that allows for digital documentation, and also more broadly a community of users with shared interests, and it therefore also meets the definition of a virtual community. As Storypark featured heavily throughout this research, the following section provides an overview of its design and functionality and therefore provides context to this research more broadly.

Storypark is a New Zealand based software company that provides an online platform accessed via an iOS<sup>12</sup> or alternatively Android<sup>13</sup> app that allows educators to document and record learning and share this information with nominated accounts such as parents and carers (Storypark, 2018). Storypark was first launched in 2012 and has been adopted across a range of early education settings in New Zealand, Australia and now globally. Storypark promotes its purpose as:

To help every child fulfil their unique potential by connecting and empowering the community around them ... We believe that it takes a community to raise a child and have created Storypark as a platform to help support this belief. (para. 2)

As described on the Storypark website, Storypark enables educational settings to “Record and communicate learning as it happens via photos, videos, audio and observations within a secure online environment. Receive instant feedback and plan new ways to extend children’s unique interests and abilities” (Storypark, 2018).

Storypark is currently being used by a range of large children's services organisations, including KU Children's Services, ECMS, Goodstart Early Learning, Mission Australia and Guardian Early Learning Group. Storypark claims to enhance quality practice and encourage

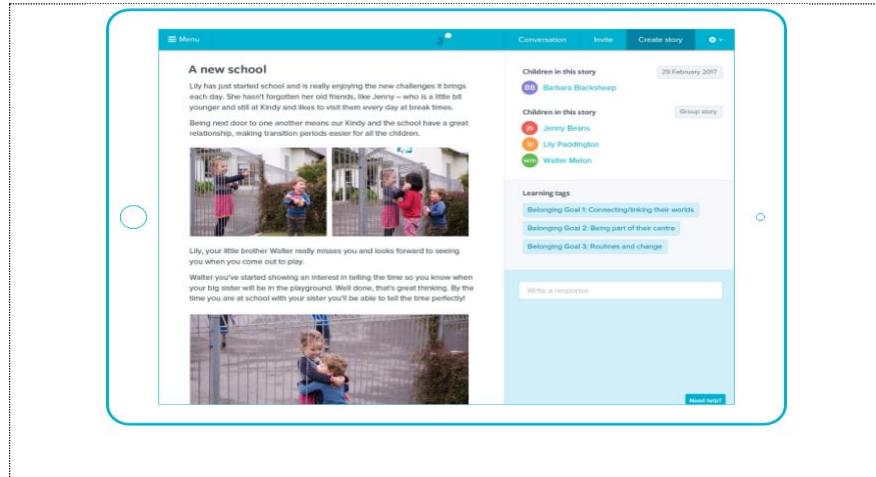
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<sup>12</sup> iOS is the Apple Inc. operating system used in Apple products such as the iPhone and iPad.

<sup>13</sup> Android is the mobile operating system used by Google.

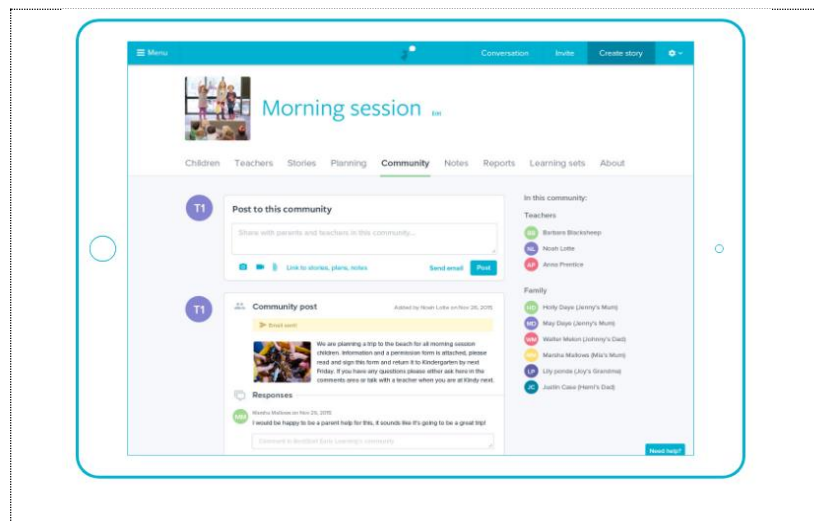
reflective, intentional teaching and personalised learning (Storypark, 2018). Figures 11 and 12 are screenshots of Storypark that show platform capability.

**Figure 11: Storypark**



<https://www.storypark.com/au/>

**Figure 12: Storypark**



<https://www.storypark.com/au/>

Using social media applications and platforms to digitise documentation and engage in professional development and mentoring has generally been received positively by parents and educators. Nevertheless, the research on how early childhood educators can use these types of social media platforms to engage with families remains limited. Therefore, this study begins to address the gap in research on how social media may be used to collaborate with families. The

following section provides a discussion on the enablers and barriers to the uptake of technology in educational contexts more broadly.

There is a range of factors said to influence the uptake and use of social media technologies in the education sector (Churches, 2009; Lemon, 2019; Mumtaz, 2000; Seifert, 2016). Access to the technology, ease of use, support and professional learning all play a role in how comfortable teachers are in attempting to integrate new technologies into their existing practice. According to Blackwell (2013), over the past two decades, many early childhood educators have shown reluctance to engage with technology due to factors such as their personal lack of relevant skill sets, traditional teaching methods and pedagogical beliefs. Furthermore, a study by Blackwell, Lauricella, Wartella, Robb, and Schomburg (2013) examined the barriers of technology use, surveying 1329 early childhood educators. They found that although extrinsic barriers such as access to technology played a role, intrinsic motivators such as educators' personal beliefs about the appropriateness of technology in early childhood settings was a significant barrier, which influenced their actual use of technology with children. Likewise, Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik, Sendurur, and Sendurur (2012) posit that educators' personal beliefs, including teaching philosophy, and the perceived value of technology are major factors in employing technology in educational practice. Although research by the aforementioned authors is in the context of technology use with children, not educators, understanding the barriers of general technology use may provide some basis for thinking around how early childhood educators perceive social media use as part of their early childhood professional role.

### **2.5.2 Social media and collaborative practice**

Emerging research on the use of social media in fostering collaborative spaces generally appears positive (Ahmed et al., 2019). According to Seifert (2016); Shokri and Dafoulas (2016), social networks as collaborative spaces allow for empowerment to share ideas, a sense

of community, availability and accessibility that enable ubiquitous learning. There has been limited research focusing specifically on the use of social media in education for the development of collaborative partnerships with families. There is a need to examine further the use of social media in establishing professional relationships between educators and families, going beyond communication for personal and social interactions.

Although several studies have examined the use of social media as an educational tool, for example, the use of Twitter and Facebook in pathology practice (Oltulu, Mannan, & Gardner, 2018) and Twitter in arts higher education (Lemon, 2019), there has not been a strong emphasis on the use of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the educational setting. Initial research presented by Yost and Fan (2014) examined early childhood educators' perceptions of using social media as a collaborative form of communication by asking what they perceive as being positive or negative about the use of social media with families. Yost and Fan's (2014) study provided some insight into both the enabling factors for using social media with families to collaborate and the perceived barriers against using social media. The findings from Yost and Fan (2014) revealed that the enablers discussed in adopting social media use were:

- ease of use
- speed of communication

The perceived barriers were:

- knowledge and confidence in using social media
- concerns about confidentiality related to conversations
- the use of photographs of children

More recently, Fan and Yost (2019) explored the readiness of educators and families to adopt social media for collaboration. Their research involved three childcare centres in one state in

Australia. Their findings proposed that social media tools could assist in facilitating collaborative partnerships by extending collaboration opportunities into virtual spaces. The results indicated a low level of social media adoption by educators and families for education purposes, but a willingness to explore possibilities of social media to facilitate collaboration beyond that which existed. This study builds upon the work done by Fan and Yost (2019) and adds value to the investigation of social media affording new possibilities in collaborative practice.

Similarly, Sunderland and Speden (2017) examined the perceptions of families, educators and therapists regarding the use of Storypark within one early childhood setting in New Zealand. They interviewed nine participants, comprising educators, families and therapists, within one setting to establish if Storypark software had complemented connections between home and school. Findings suggest that the use of Storypark had complemented connections, with all participants affirming that the use of Storypark had improved connections and complemented the use of existing practices such as written journals, emails and face-to-face communications. Educators within the setting felt that Storypark assisted in the recording and sharing of information with families, yet were aware that only success and celebrations were shared, acknowledging this as problematic for authentic evaluation of Storypark use. Families listed usability and the affordance of a connection to their child's day, which allowed for the knowledge of day-to-day activities, as positive responses to adoption. Whereas therapists reported that Storypark allowed for treatment plans to be easily shared with families and enhanced professional learning and sharing within the context. Sunderland and Speden (2017) discuss that the reciprocity of communications was heavily weighted toward educators posting rather than families, and that the reasons for this were stated as unknown, and therefore required further investigation. They assert that Storypark afforded the sharing of knowledge and sustained connections between home and school and that the use of applications such as

Storypark requires further investigation. Considering the multiple definitions of collaborative practice and the degrees or ‘notions of collaboration’ of as presented by Amendt (2008), perhaps the disconnect between information sharing rather than true collaboration, is more about the nature of the collaborative practice rather than the technology itself.

This study extends the work of Fan and Yost (2019); Yost and Fan (2014); and Sunderland and Speden (2017) in examining staff perceptions of the use of social media as a communication tool, by delving deeper into and examining the ways in which different platforms of social media are being used in a wider educational context. The differing theoretical frameworks between Fan and Yost (2019) and Sunderland and Speden (2017), and the study reported here, add value in allowing new opportunities for social media use in early childhood to emerge. Additionally, a more comprehensive investigation of the use of Facebook and Storypark within a wider range of early childhood settings contributes to existing research on the uptake of social media to promote collaborative partnerships in early childhood. Consequently, this study investigated social media as a means of collaboration viewed through the lens of Third Space, allowing new opportunities for families and educators to engage on a level beyond personal social interaction.

## **2.6 Social media and the changing work paradigm**

This study explores both the opportunities for social media use and the implications for educators. Therefore, discussing the literature on a changing work paradigm is important in relation to educators’ changing work paradigm and provides context to this research. The effect of social media on work–life balance has been investigated in other professional sectors with interesting findings that may correlate to that of education, and more specifically this study. The boundaries between work and private life, and between professional and personal identities are being reshaped, and are a changing paradigm in a social media and workplace context

according to Barnes, Balnave, and Holland (2018). They assert that the use of social media in personal and professional contexts is blurring the lines between work and private lives. Similarly, Gill and Pratt (2008) report that employees can now easily access email, send and receive messages and stay engaged, therefore allowing them to work remotely. Consequently, this has “given rise to more flexible work schedules and explicit (from corporate) and implicit (from peers) expectations that employees remain constantly connected to their jobs” (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2011, p. 10). According to Gregg (2011), this is best understood “as a process of presence bleed, where work-related tasks enabled by communication platforms and devices creep into spaces and times that were previously off limits” (p. 12). Consequently, employees face an increased pressure to remain virtually ‘on the job’ for longer periods of time, and at times previously not worked, “Facilitated by advancements in information and communication technologies ... work and leisure can increasingly be seen as extensions of each other” (Deuze, 2007, p. 30). Deuze discusses the changing workplace paradigm and the decline in ‘nine-to-five’ facilitated by the rise in digital communications. As a result, the use of social media has the potential to affect the ways in which people work and communicate, “blurring the boundaries between work and private life” (Deuze, 2007, p. 13). Findings such as those presented by Deuze (2007) and Gregg (2011) may provide opportunities for a broader consideration in education settings such as those in this study.

### **2.6.1 Privacy and social media**

The right to privacy is a fundamental human right and essential in protecting the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Protecting users’ privacy while ensuring functionality and appropriate use of social media is complex. Discussing privacy and social media is relevant in the context of this study as educators have a responsibility to ensure the privacy of children and families is respected and maintained. Although privacy is not explicitly mentioned in the National Quality Standards, it is implicit within the context of relationships

with children and families, and professional roles and responsibilities. There appears limited research on the role of the educator and privacy in an online environment. Research in the early childhood sector tends to focus on educating children on the safe use of technology (Lauricella, Herdzina, & Robb, 2020) and does not extend to its use by educators. A discussion on social media and privacy more broadly provides context in terms of privacy risk and attitudes towards privacy, and may have findings that can be generalised in the early childhood sector.

With billions of people using and consuming social media daily to share content (Perrin, 2015; Smith, 2020), upload photos, comment and contribute, the issue of privacy is paramount. Social media platforms have access to users' personal data on a vast scale. Recently published statistics by Zhang et al. (2018) identify the following levels of social media use in relation to the generation of data:

- Twitter generates 500 million tweets per day with 328 million users
- Facebook has the largest community of users with 1.3 billion active users

According to Bansal, Kumar, Rawat, and Choudhury (2018), approximately 2.5 quintillion bytes of data daily is generated with the majority of this coming from social networking sites. This is particularly relevant to the subject of privacy when considering how data is accessed, used and stored. Therefore, who can access the data generated from social media sites, and how is it securely stored? What constitutes public or private space, in a virtual space, is open for debate (Stevens, O'Donnell, & Williams, 2015). Simply because something is of a private or personal nature does not mean that it is privately held information. According to Stevens et al. (2015), data can be accessed from online sources that do not have a private membership, therefore meaning that this data is considered public. In other words, Facebook pages without

carefully selected privacy settings can be considered in the public domain, and therefore information posted is available for use by anyone.

Similarly, Ilia, Polakis, Athanasopoulos, Maggi, and Ioannidis (2015) and Such and Criado (2018) assert that the vast amount of data generated when users upload and share content, which can be of a personal nature, contributes to data that builds profiles of different behaviours, trends, interactions and associations of an individual. This data supplies service providers, marketing companies and researchers vast amounts of user-generated data to improve and personalise social media sites, exploit and increase sales, and to also understand behaviours and patterns of use (Ghazaleh & Huan, 2018).

Furthermore, Grossklags and Barradale (2014) discuss that the data generated via social media also presents risks in terms of loss of privacy and the potential for cybercrime. The structure of social media sites themselves provides functionality and mechanisms that enable individuals to share personal information with millions of others, that previously may have remained confidential.

According to Bansal et al. (2018), this is further exacerbated by the overwhelming rise of smartphones and mobile devices which has added to concerns over privacy with emergent data featuring current activity, live locations, daily routines, emotions and individuals present (tagging) also captured in large data sets. Problematic is the awareness of what content is not only being shared in a public space but what information is being captured in rich user-generated data. For example, posting live locations and tagging friends allows everyone to know where you are and who you are with in real time. In terms of what is visible in a public sense, social media consumers often overlook who can see the content they post, and the implications of this (Such & Criado, 2016).

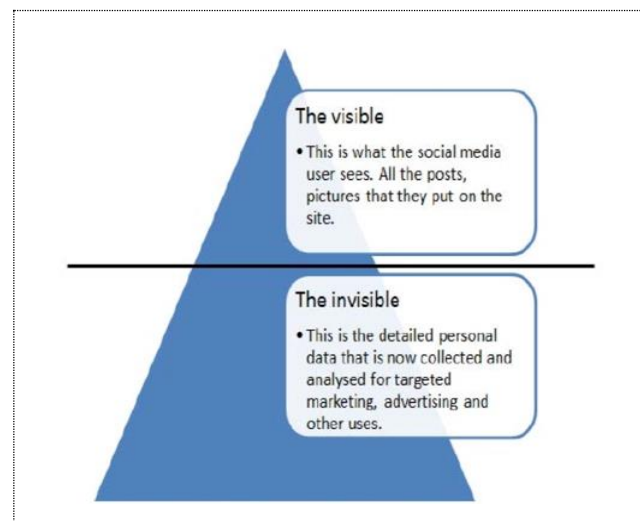
According to a 2014 survey, 51 per cent of employers access potential candidates' profiles through sites such as Facebook (Alufasian, Zhou, Kantarcioglu, & Thuraisingham, 2017). A recent study by Alufasian et al. (2017) investigated what data could be obtained through data mining Facebook likes. An analysis of their findings shows that by using Facebook likes alone, they were able to predict political views and sexual orientation with high accuracy. Similarly, Calandrino, Kilzer, Narayanan, Felten, and Shmatikov (2011) assert that user recommendations such as "You might also like" (p. 231) rely on aggregated data based on user recommendations and consumer behaviours alongside personal patterns of behaviour. Although de-identified, these generate data that could potentially pose a risk to individual privacy. Awareness of the data created and the potential threat to privacy is therefore paramount in social media use personally, in business and education settings.

Building from that idea, Bansal et al. (2018) refer to an iceberg model of social media data (Figure 13) demonstrating that what users share to their social networking sites, and the ways in which that data can be used, are complex. Access to user-generated data, potential vulnerability and protecting privacy has seen increasing media attention in recent years (Shevchuk & Pastukh, 2019). Such concerns mandate social media sites to sanitise data and ensure it is anonymised to protect individuals' exposure to a range of risks such as identity and attribute disclosure. Identity and attribute disclosure occurs when an individual is mapped or linked to a particular set of data, and personal information such as identity, location and behaviours are identified (Ghazaleh & Huan, 2018).

Rich user-generated data sets are attractive to both the public and private sector; organisations looking to improve usability and personal service, businesses looking to advertise and understand consumer preferences, brokers looking to sell data, and researchers seeking to analyse data (Zhang, Sun, Zhang, Zhang, & Hu, 2018). However, personal information of this nature can make users vulnerable in terms of privacy breaches and unauthorised use of using

personal details. This is particularly prevalent when considering the use of social media in education settings, and when the use of social media involves children. Research on social media in the context of early childhood tends to focus on children's use of social media, and the perceived dangers for children (Reid Chassiakos, Radesky, Christakis, Moreno, & Cross, 2016). Limited research on social media use and privacy in the context of social media use that involves children more broadly, for example the complexities of what is shared, and by whom it is shared, in an online space.

**Figure 13: An iceberg of social media**



(Bansal et al., 2018)

A 2009 study by Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, and Hughes (2009) focused on Facebook use and users' privacy. They found that although users articulated that they were aware of the privacy issues, users continued to upload and share personal information. Similarly, a study by Jones and Soltren (2005) found that 74 per cent of Facebook users were aware of privacy options, yet only 62 per cent of users set privacy restrictions. Furthermore, approximately 70 per cent of users in their study posted personal demographic information such as age, gender, location and interests despite their lack of sufficient privacy settings. This indicates a disparity between known risk and a consumer's daily behaviour online. According to Debatin et al. (2009), this

may be due to the high gratification levels and habits of daily users in social media. It may also be attributed to “the third-person effect” (Debatin et al., 2009, p. 81), where risk is ascribed to others and not self. Consequently, the reward and habit of sharing personal information outweighs the risk for many users, and users tend to think that adverse outcomes will not happen to them. This confirms previous research by Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007) and Livingstone (2008), where individuals’ knowledge of privacy settings was not enacted in their social media practice. With social media inviting contributions of a personal nature, the balance between the functionality of platforms and the preservation of an individual’s privacy continues to be a challenge. Findings such as those from Dwyer et al. (2007) and Debatin et al. (2009) may have applicability in the early childhood context if educators understand privacy concerns, but then do not apply them in their practices with children and families.

As previously stated, recent policy reform in the Australian early childhood and care sector has seen a range of mandates that necessitate collaboration between early childhood educators and families. Although collaborative partnerships with families have been established on the basis that they add value to the education of young children, the nature of these collaborations and the mechanisms by which positive outcomes are achieved remains unclear. Grant et al. (2016) suggest that a culture of compliance as a result of reforms to achieve quality has resulted in pedagogical changes and the undermining of educators’ agency. Therefore, addressing the mandates through the use of social media may provide opportunities for educators to collaborate with families. The continual growth of social media as a tool for collaboration in both business and education has provided a foundation to explore these opportunities further. However, research in the early childhood sector is limited. This study begins to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the use of social media to build collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting.

## **2.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided a literature review on the current context of collaborative partnerships between families and ECEC centres in the context of policy reforms in the sector in Australia. Quality in ECEC has become the dominant focus of the Australian policy agenda driven by the notion of collaborative partnerships in terms of their social and economic affordances. The premise of ‘investing in ECEC now, saves money in the future’ highlights the neoliberal agenda which has shaped ECEC over the past decade. Social media as a means of facilitating collaboration is a rapidly emerging phenomenon. The increasing prevalence of social media in both personal lives and workplaces highlighted a presence bleed whereby work related tasks encroached into time and space once previously off limits. The implications of social media use included blurred lines between work and private time, and the impact of social media on an individual’s right to privacy.

In the next chapter, the methodological approach of a case study, and the theoretical framework of Third Space Theory (Bhaba,1994) that guided the study are explored and discussed.

### **3 Chapter three: Methodology and theoretical framework**

#### **3.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter provides a rationale for the research methodology for this project, which was designed to be flexible to allow for possibilities to emerge throughout the process of examining the use of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in early years contexts. The use of Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994; Moje et al., 2004; Soja, 2018) as a theoretical framework enabled the consideration of alternative ways of collaborating and interacting with families, and this study adopts an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary approach to that process. This research employed an exploratory case study design (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Yin, 2014) in order to address the research questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were derived from surveys and further qualitative data through interviews with educators, observations of practice in situ, informal conversations with families and by studying the social media artefacts generated by teachers and responded to by parents. Family perspectives across all five case study sites were collected through the Qualtrics survey (Appendix B) and informal conversations during researcher observation in each setting. The data collection processes are outlined, including a description of the initial survey for educators, the secondary survey to identify case study sites, educator interviews, observations within each setting and family surveys and informal conversations across all case study sites. Finally, data analysis processes are explained, and the limitations of the design are discussed.

#### **3.2 Study design**

The research was designed to examine the practices of educators using social media to communicate and collaborate with families. It investigated the overarching research question: *How does the use of social media provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative*

*partnerships with families in the early years setting?* and, *What are the implications of the use of social media for educators?*

This project is framed as a mixed methods research study that is concerned with exploring and understanding a specific educational context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) through the theoretical framework of Third Space (Bhabha, 1994; Moje et al., 2004). The design of the study consisted of an initial phase in which a survey was completed by (75) educators online. A follow up survey of those educators who indicated a willingness to participate as a case study was also conducted. A case study design Yin (2014) was selected in order to answer the research questions with an in-depth analysis of the ways in which social media provides new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with parents in the early years. A case study is appropriate when the focus of the research is to investigate how and why questions where natural behaviour is being studied. According to Lewin and Luckin (2010) and Stark and Torrance (2005), the strength of a case study is that it allows for an in-depth exploration of a setting and the participant's experiences and perspectives within that setting. In adopting an exploratory case study methodology (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Yin, 2014) data was collected in interviews with educators, in conversation with parents at the centres, in observations made over weeks in the centres and by viewing the artefacts that constituted the online examples of the educators and parents interactions.

Creswell and Clark (2018) discuss the ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods can be mixed; through integrating the two sets of data, having quantitative data build on qualitative data or vice versa, or embedding a secondary data method that supports the primary collection of data. In the present study, mixed methods research was adopted to achieve the aims of the research with the data gathered through surveys in the first phase, and then through three exploratory case studies.

Similarly, the exploratory design of the case study is used as it allows for multiple opportunities when the study being evaluated has no clear or single set of outcomes (Yin, 2014). As with exploratory design, the intent of this study was to use the quantitative and qualitative data analysed through the survey to develop and inform the qualitative design of the cases themselves. In this study the premise was that using the data from the initial survey would provide a snapshot of collaborative practice to be further explored in the qualitative cases. Employing this design allowed for the in depth development of qualitative interviews and observations in each of the settings to examine the ways in which the three different social media applications (email, Facebook and Storypark) were being used in Victorian early childhood settings in order to engage and collaborate with families.

A key issue in case study research regards the in-depth study of phenomena versus a broad view of research, which gives a more general overview of a topic. According to Stake (2006), case studies generally favour depth over breadth in order to gain a detailed and intimate picture of a case. In this instance, the research incorporated descriptions of the settings, participants' experiences, direct quotes, vignettes and insights revealed through an examination of artefacts and immersion in the setting, to provide a detailed picture of each case. This research valued in-depth coverage and investigated three separate cases of social media use to allow for elements of comparison. The three cases were designed around the types of social media being used, not merely three different physical locations. This case study intended to examine contemporary practices of the use of social media with families in establishing and maintaining collaborative practices. The case study allowed for an in-depth focus on how social media was being used in a range of ways in everyday life settings. The data generated and knowledge constructed aimed to provide insights into individual experiences, yet also provide a picture of particularisation and possible generalisations for similar situations within the context of early childhood (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Stake, 1995, 2006).

### **3.3 Theoretical framework**

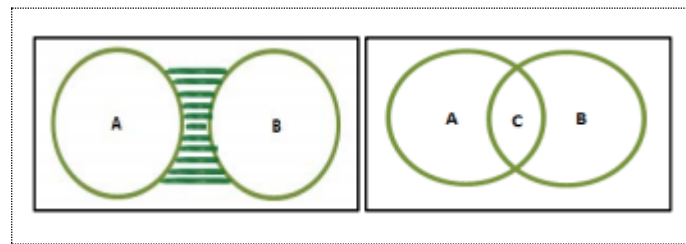
This research was concerned with identifying current practices in collaborating with families and the opportunities social media afforded in this space. The theoretical framework embedded in this research was drawn from Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994; Moje et al., 2004). The research allowed for an examination of collaborative practice through a Third Space lens, which aimed not to replace traditional practices but supplement current knowledge of engaging and collaborating with families in the early years.

#### **3.3.1 What is Third Space Theory?**

Third Space as a theoretical framework has been theorised by a number of scholars (Bhabha, 1994; Moje et al., 2004; Soja, 2018) and acts as a theoretical lens to explore the construction of knowledge that exists between spaces, often resulting in a third space, or hybrid space of knowledge construction.

According to Bhabha (1994) and Moje et al. (2004), Third Space Theory provides a lens to examine, investigate and understand ‘spaces in between’ multiple binaries, conceptualisations, or discourses (Figure 14). Bhabha's (1994) conception of Third Space Theory was based on his research into colonisation. His research focused on the impact of colonisation, and what happens when indigenous people are caught between their traditional culture and a new culture of colonisers (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha (1994) proclaimed this to be the Third Space, where a hybrid of identities and cultures merge between the traditional and new. Likewise, Meredith (1998) posits that Third Space and hybridity was born from the study of cultures, conceptualising what occurs when cultures are mixed, resulting in a hybrid third space where the product of two cultures combined creates a new and unknown entity.

**Figure 14: Third Space Theory**



adapted from Edirisinghe, Cheok, Nakatsu, and Widolo (2011)

**A – First Space B – Second Space C – Third Space**

According to Bhabha (1994) and (Moje et al., 2004), Third Space provides a useful theoretical framework that allows new pieces of knowledge to emerge without replacing or preferencing existing knowledge. They assert it as a metaphor for a space where two existing binaries or discourses of knowledge can come together to create a new knowledge. This new knowledge, known as the third space, allows for inclusionary rather than exclusionary approaches for new knowledge creation. "The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerge, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge." (Bhabha, 1994; Rutherford, 1990, p. 211)

Similarly, according to Meredith (1998), the Third Space framework allows for the production of new knowledge surpassing existing binaries:

The Third Space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility. It is an 'interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative' space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity. (p. 3)

Furthermore, this is supported by the work of Jang and Kang (2019), who assert that Third Space invites knowledge to coexist productively, and the "thirdness" (p. 84) is what is produced in the hybridisation of the first and second space. Moreover, Lam (2018) asserts that the Third

Space allows for the combination and creation of new knowledge that is enriched when spaces intersect, inviting the reconceptualization of knowledge, and new practices to emerge. Accordingly, Third Space, as a theoretical framework, has been adopted in a range of research and across a variety of disciplines.

### **3.3.2 Third Space as a lens in this research**

Third Space Theory is positioned as a space where different funds of knowledge (Moje et al., 2004) or practices are merged and ‘brought into conversation’ to examine, challenge and remould current practice (Levy, 2008). According to Muller (2003), Third Space provides fertile opportunity to combine existing practices and knowledge to create new ways of thinking and, consequently, creating new ways of thinking was a factor in its application to this research:

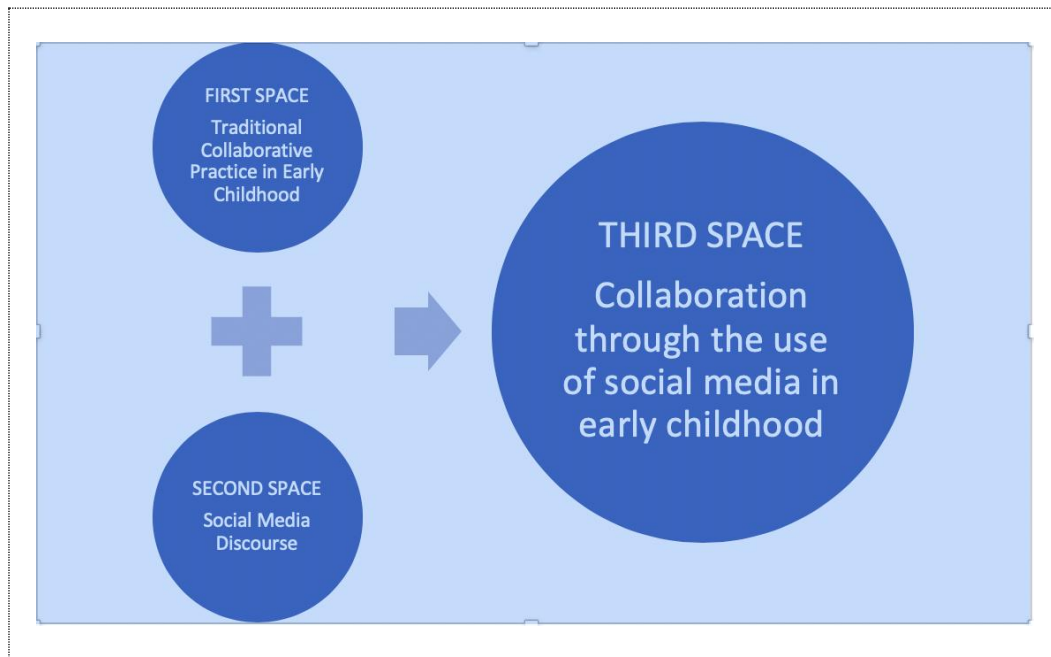
Recent work in cultural theory claims that this ‘in-between’ region or ‘third space’ is a fertile environment in which participants can combine diverse knowledges with new insights and plans for action to inform the needs of their organizations, institutions, products, and services. (p. 167)

Accordingly, Third Space Theory was employed in this research since it allowed for new possibilities of collaboration to emerge in the ‘thirdness’ permitted by the methodology itself. Third Space as a theoretical framework facilitated thinking about the emergence of new opportunities without criticising existing practices, hence inclusionary rather than exclusionary.

According to Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) and Selwyn (2002), research involving technology in the educational context has focused on attitudes that new technologies supersede traditional or historical practices, that new ways of doing must replace the old. Furthermore, Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) proclaim that often research methodologies reinforce

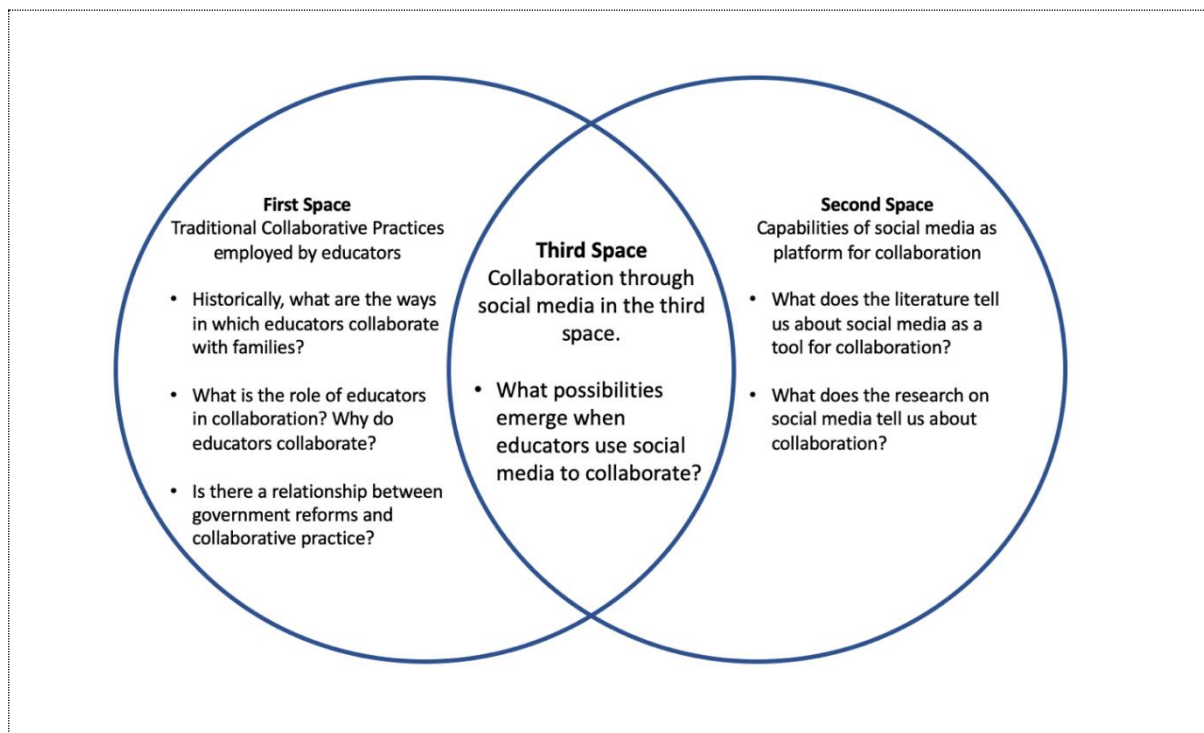
technological evangelism and position new practices as superior to old. Consequently, applying Third Space to this study supported the thinking by Selwyn (2002) and Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014), whereby technological evangelism does not supersede existing practices, and that new ways of doing can coexist, and even supplement them. In applying Third Space Theory to this research, the focus moved away from focusing on binaries, such as "old/new, good/bad, valued/undervalued, updated/outmoded" (Jordan & Elsdon-Clifton, 2014, p. 223) to see how both traditional and existing practices merged with the uptake of social media to complement the existing collaborative practice employed by early childhood educators (this is further discussed in section 3.3.4). In terms of this research, technological evangelism and replacing existing practices with new was exactly the opposite intent of the research itself. The Third Space framework allowed for a hybridity of existing collaborative practices, merging them with existing social media practice to examine what emerged in the Third Space. Applying Third Space Theory to educational research allowed existing practices to be recognised while providing an opportunity for the development of new practices to emerge within this new thirdness. Consequently, Third Space developed an inclusionary, not exclusionary approach, not preferencing new for old collaborative practices, which importantly, could be more widely received by educators in the field who may supplement existing practice with practice that emerged in the third space.

**Figure 15: Third Space as a lens in this research**



Thus, the construct of Third Space Theory is relevant as the theoretical lens to investigate the opportunities social media offer in collaborating with families in early childhood settings. Figure 15 explains the use of Third Space in this research. The first space was associated with the historic and existing practices early childhood educators use to engage and collaborate with families, and second space aligned with the opportunities social media provide. Third space occupies what happens when the first and second spaces merge, creating a hybrid space. Moje et al. (2004) discuss third space as a way of building bridges of knowledge with the third space itself being a navigational space. In other words, this study aimed to explore the possibilities of the third space as a navigational space, where educators could build bridges of knowledge and engage in trialling the use of social media to collaborate with families (Figure 16 explains each space within the theoretical framework).

**Figure 16: Explanation of spaces in this research**



### 3.3.3 Third Space in research

The theoretical framework of Third Space has been applied in a number of fields including culture (Bhabha, 1994), education (Jang & Kang, 2019; Jordan & Elsdon-Clifton, 2014; Lam, 2018; Moje et al., 2004), and technology (Edirisinghe et al., 2011; Muller, 2003). Lam (2018) adopted Third Space Theory in her research into the boundary crossing of those whose careers straddle two binaries – arts and academia. Her work allowed for the transmission of knowledge and the brokering of new knowledge in the hybrid zone of Third Space. In applying this theoretical framework Lam (2018) allowed for an overlapping of traditional arts and academia knowledges, brokering a new space of transformative knowledge in the Third Space. Consequently, the affordance of Third Space as the theoretical framework in Lam's (2018) study allowed for new ways of thinking and new practices to emerge that were inclusionary rather than exclusionary, that is, preferencing both arts and academia:

The third space perspective directs attention to the in-between movement space in career boundary-crossing where career actors construct hybrid role identities and undertake brokering to overcome knowledge boundaries. The creative artists looked at in this study, who work across the domains of arts and academia, are particularly illustrative of the agency of career actors in exploiting the creative generativity of their hybridity in the third space. What has emerged from the analysis are two distinct categories of hybrids with different career mobility and work role transition experience. The findings suggest that the process and outcomes of knowledge brokering can vary according to the patterns of hybridity and topology of the third space generated. (Lam, 2018, p. 1736)

Furthermore, in the discipline of technology, Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016) applied the lens of Third Space Theory in their study into the use of Facebook by secondary school students in Denmark. The study investigated the use of student managed Facebook pages in a bid to explore the potential opportunities of Facebook use when pages are created and managed solely by students. They analysed 2247 posts and 12,217 comments to investigate how and to what extent students use Facebook for academic purposes. In the Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016) study, the Third Space was the student managed Facebook page, which was characterised as the space whereby students blended their personal, social and academic lives. Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016) found that the affordance of student managed Facebook groups enabled students to merge their personal, social and academic use of Facebook, resulting in a Third Space that created a community of shared practice whereby enriching school life:

We can conclude that student-managed Facebook groups provide a third space of 'school life' between a personal first space of 'social life' and an institutional second space of 'schoolwork.' The content analysis showed that the students, to a large extent,

blend their personal, social life with academic schoolwork within the groups. As previous studies have shown, there are significant educational potentials of first and second spaces of Facebook usage. With this study, we wish to highlight that there are also unique potentials in a third space. The student-managed Facebook groups of the current study reveal a different kind of use from Facebook as a teacher- managed institutional system or as an SNS managed by individuals. The study shows that the students formed class communities where they participated in a shared practice of helping each other in coping with and enriching school life. (Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016, p. 183)

The examples presented by Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016) and Lam (2018), highlight how Third Space Theory has been used in a number of discipline specific contexts. More pointedly, the affordance of Third Space as a theoretical lens allowed for the creation of new knowledge without preferencing new for old knowledge.

Although Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) assert that Third Space Theory is a valuable framework in education research, criticism of its use outside its original design, and the exporting of methodologies, is discussed by Halbach (2002) and Richardson Bruna, (2009). In particular, the application of Third Space as a theoretical framework to research outside of its original cultural investigation has been criticised by Richardson Bruna (2009). Richardson Bruna (2009) asserts that third spaces are inevitable and cannot be controlled, manipulated or created by researchers. The concern she raised was that in educational research, the Third Space becomes something "teachers are trying to achieve, rather than something, already in existence, to simply affirm and employ, as part of their pedagogical praxis" (Richardson Bruna, 2009, p. 225). Richardson Bruna (2009) makes a valid point regarding the manufacture and control of third spaces, whereby the Third Space is teacher-directed and the purpose for this space

manipulated by the teacher. However, it could also be argued that third spaces have always existed and that through recognising these spaces in research methodology, new possibilities can be explored and thus influence the dominant discourse. In many instances, Third Space as a framework has been applied to a range of contexts to allow for possibilities to naturally emerge in the “thirdness” (Jang & Kang, 2019, p. 84). Richardson Bruna’s (2009) critique of Third Space in terms of the space being manipulated for the purpose of the teacher is also valid – for what intent is the theoretical framework applied, and what purpose does it serve? Although a valid point, this could be applied to any methodological framework more broadly, and therefore any research undertaken needs to be considered in the context of each study.

Additionally, Richardson Bruna’s (2009) critique of third space as a research methodology outside cultural studies is somewhat supported by Halbach’s (2002) discussion on exporting methodologies. Halbach (2002) discusses the use of a range of methodologies within education research outside their original context. Transplanting methodologies to contexts outside their original scope without considering adaptations to suit the peculiarities of situations is explored. Halbach (2002) asserts caution that exporting methodologies to research outside its intended scope requires careful consideration. However, she does not advise against the use. Rather, she recommends adapting to ensure that the complexities and particularities suit the local characteristics of the study:

... problems can appear when a given methodology that has been developed in a certain context is transplanted from this context into another, without adapting it to the peculiarities of this new context. Attention has to be paid to cultural and personal factors ... factors that in principle are not directly related to the methodology ... This does not, however, mean that methodologies must not be exported or that they only have a local

value, but rather that they have to be adapted so as to suit local characteristics. (Halbach, 2002, p. 248)

Furthermore, the use of Third Space Theory as a theoretical framework within any research needs to be carefully considered in terms of manufactured spaces and research intent. In regard to this study, the Third Space was not being controlled or manipulated and was already in existence; social media is already being experimented within education, and the intention of the researcher was not to control or dictate the outcome, but to observe the possibilities. Applying Third Space in this research positions the creation of new knowledge not to supersede existing practice, but to investigate the coexistence of the ways in which educators and families can collaborate using social media. The approach of inclusionary rather than exclusionary was especially important in this research, as collaborative practices that were occurring in the third space were not intended to preference or replace existing practices. Consequently, the use of Third Space as the theoretical framework for this study is outside the historical context of methodological use. However, the characteristics of Third Space as a methodology have been considered, and its use in allowing possibilities to emerge made it particularly suitable as the framework for this research.

The following section will further investigate how Third Space Theory has been applied in the field of education research.

### **3.3.4 Third Space in education research**

Several scholars have applied Third Space Theory in education research contexts (Cook, 2005; Jordan & Elsdon-Clifton, 2014; Klein, Taylor, Onore, Strom, & Abrams, 2013; Moje et al., 2004). According to Cook (2005); Moje et al. (2004) and Wiltse (2015), Third Space Theory is conceptualised in educational research as a bridge allowing navigation between marginalised

and conventional knowledges and discourses, and as a means of crossing boundaries to create new discourses and produce new forms of learning and knowledge. Although the use of Third Space was traditionally used to discuss culture and identity (Bhabha, 1994), it has been applied in several educational studies investigating language and literacy education (Moje et al., 2004), play and its relationship between home and preschool (Yahya & Wood, 2017), reading and the home–school partnership (Wiltse, 2015), preservice teacher education (Jordan & Elsdon-Clifton, 2014) and teacher education (Klein et al., 2013). These authors have applied Third Space Theory as a lens to investigate possibilities and opportunities that emerge when spaces such as home and school, or universities and classrooms, are combined.

According to McDonough (2014), in educational research the concept of Third Space is supportive of the development of new ideas and possibilities where new and emerging practices can be developed. This is evident in the use of Third Space by Moje et al. (2004), who applied Third Space Theory to the educational context to examine the third space that exists between the home and school in order to assist in literacy development. According to Moje et al. (2004), the first space referred to the home environment, the second space took the form of the schooling context, while the third space was positioned as a way to build bridges, a navigational space to make sense of the literacy practices and knowledge. Consequently, the theoretical framework of Third Space in Moje et al.'s., (2004) research allowed for the creation of new knowledge in the third space. This hybrid zone informed practices and allowed for typically marginalised voices to be heard, thus complementing the existing work done in both home and schools. In relation to this study, the creation of new knowledge that is informed by practices in the hybrid third space makes this theoretical framework especially valuable, and it is for this reason that Third Space has been applied in the context of this research.

Furthermore, Kucirkova (2017) and Al-Yaqout and Nikolajva (2015) discussed the use of Third Space for its inclusive rather than exclusive nature when studying interactivity and digital texts

for children. Their review of the literature into digital and print-based literacy found that applying Third Space Theory allowed for more innovation in creation:

The combination of two media in digital books can be beneficial, as long as their individual features do not cancel out, but complement each other. Border spaces, such as those emphasized in the third-space theory, carry the potential for innovation because they can mesh the assets of printed books and digital games: 'the boundary between book and animation becomes blurred, but as frequently happens, it is in the border area that interesting experimental, hybrid texts emerge.' (Al-Yaqout & Nikolajva, 2015 as cited in Kucirkova, 2017, p. 1176)

In the research by Al-Yaqout and Nikolajva (2015) and Kucirkova (2017), the third space did not replace the existing spaces of book or animation, it allowed for the creation of hybrid texts in the thirdness. Although this research differs from that of Al-Yaqout and Nikolajva (2015) and Kucirkova (2017), and is concerned with collaborative partnerships in early childhood, the theoretical framework of Third Space is relevant as it allows for inclusive rather than exclusive principles to be adopted. In particular, Third Space allows for existing collaborative practices to be valued and included in the hybrid Third Space.

Furthermore, Howell, Sheffield, Shelton, and Vujaklija (2017) applied Third Space in the context of preservice teacher education and teaching practicum, creating an online platform as the Third Space in which preservice teachers could discuss the theory and practice in real time with academics. Findings suggested that the Third Space enabled real-time co-construction of knowledge between preservice teachers and academics and resulted in moments of critical instruction and scaffolded learning. Likewise, Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) discuss Third Space as a theoretical framework to change the dominant discourse in technological educational research. They present the term 'technological evangelism', as first discussed by

Selwyn (2002). Selwyn (2002) asserts that technological evangelism is based on a discourse where the superiority of the new outshines existing technology or practice. Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) proposed that Third Space allowed for new ways of thinking to emerge that allow new possibilities in terms of educational research; that old ways of doing things do not necessarily need to be replaced with new ways and, in fact, that using Third Space Theory can allow for the old and new ways to coexist together:

One way is to compare the 'new' to the 'old,' with arguments around the superiority of the new, resulting in the conclusion that the new technology must replace the old. Usually, there is little, if any, consideration that both 'the old' and 'the new' can indeed co-exist. (p. 221)

Consequently, the use of Third Space research design by Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014); Moje et al. (2004) Al-Yaqout and Nikolajva (2015) and Kucirkova (2017) has been fruitful in providing opportunities to emerge in the context of the Third Space resulting in the creation of new knowledges, discourses and practices.

### **3.4 Research design and methods**

Having established the theoretical framework that underpins the research design, the following section discusses and justifies the methods employed in the research. Presented are the design rationale, methods of data collection, evaluation of data sources, the emergence of the cases themselves, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study design.

#### **3.4.1 Data collection methods and design rationale**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2012), it is suggested that case study research provides an intensive description of phenomena and allows participants to share personal stories and let individual voices be heard. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected primarily

through surveys, one-on-one interviews, observations, informal conversations and analysis of artefacts. Mixed-methods design was selected to ensure the generation of sufficient and appropriate data to guide the study and capitalise on the strengths of both methods in addressing the research questions. Multiple methods of data collection are discussed by a range of researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) who advocate that using a variety of data collection sources provides a 'thick description' which allows for multiple perspectives. Consequently, in this research, multiple methods of data collection were employed to seek and understand educators' and families' perspectives on using social media to collaborate. In this research, the data collection sources considered to be most appropriate to allow individual perspectives to be heard, and therefore employed are outlined in the table below.

**Table 5: Data source employed**

| <b>Data source</b>                             | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Initial survey<br>(Qualitative & Quantitative) | Initial educator survey (75 respondents) to gain an overview of how educators were engaging with social media to collaborate. The survey incorporated both open and closed questions. The survey provided a snapshot of current collaborative practices and social media and called for volunteers for the cases.<br><br>Survey design was based on drawing inferences, making comparisons and identifying patterns (Sapsford, 2007), Appendix A. |
| Secondary survey                               | Due to a high number of volunteers a secondary survey with open ended questions was administered to better understand volunteers experiences and use of social media which naturally generated three cases – email, Storypark and Facebook. Appendix D                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Interviews                                     | One-on-one educator interviews were used at each case study site to gain in-depth perspectives that allowed participants' voices to be heard.<br><br>Interviews were qualitative with semi-structured questions to allow new ideas to emerge (Drew et al., 2008), Appendix C                                                                                                                                                                      |

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Observations | The researchers spent time in each case study site observing practice and engaging with a range of educators and families specific to that setting. Qualitative field notes including educator vignettes and researcher reflections (Drew et al., 2008) |
| Artefacts    | Artefacts were analysed and coded using thematic analysis (refer to 3.12.2) to better understand the ways in which educators were using social media to collaborate.                                                                                    |

These data collection methods are common in social sciences research and allow for participants' voices to be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). The design was centred around the collection of information firstly through surveying the landscape, which then informed the design of the case studies themselves (refer to Figure 17 for an overview of the research design). The first phase of the research was an initial educator survey. It was designed to assess and understand the current landscape of social media use for collaborating with families (Appendix A, Survey for educators). The initial survey was designed to purposively sample (Creswell & Clark, 2018) and explore the major concepts of the study which were: educators' collaborative practice with families, and social media use. The sample criteria was that participants must be early childhood educators or families associated with a setting, and be using social media to collaborate in some capacity. The initial educator survey comprised both open and closed questions (Adams et al., 2007; Sapsford, 2007). Survey questions included:

- General data questions (*how long have you been working in the sector*)
  - Likert scale (Likert, 1932) questions (*rate the following from strongly agree to strongly disagree*)
  - Attitude statements (*I feel comfortable using social media*)
  - Open ended questions (*what is your interpretation of the term collaborative practice?*)
- (Adams et al., 2007)

The initial survey incorporated both open ended and closed questions. The former items involved frequency of use and were reported as descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008). The open ended questions allowed participants' to share individual perspectives on social media use and were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the initial survey was used as an instrument for recruiting participants for the case studies themselves. The request produced twenty-three volunteers for the cases, which was too many for the purposes of this study. Thus, a secondary survey (Appendix D) was designed to better understand experiences and reconsider the participants. Since this survey had open ended responses it enabled educators to describe the type of social media being used and provided the basis for selecting the case studies themselves. Twelve educators responded to the secondary survey and all were included in the case studies. The secondary survey found that educators were collaborating with families through the use of three different platforms – email, Storypark and Facebook. Although the twelve respondents were located across five different settings, these five settings were grouped by the type of social media being used, hence the establishment of three case studies – email, Storypark and Facebook.

The case study sites were identified from the initial and secondary survey responses in a way that allowed for an investigation of different social media platforms, and the ways in which these were being used. One-on-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) allowed participants to share experiences, providing opportunities for the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow for the creation of rich conversations with purpose (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) that aligned to the specific research questions in this study. These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed, with participants' permission. Following the interviews with educators, transcripts were member checked for clarification and additional commentary, adding to validity and accuracy of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Information obtained from the initial and secondary surveys informed the selection of the three case studies. The three cases selected investigated the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Storypark, as well as email, which is not generally considered a social media platform itself. Through the use of descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008) the initial survey determined that 23% of educators were using email to collaborate, 23 % were using Facebook and 15% were using 'other' (inclusive of Storypark). Although not technically a form social media, email was included as one of the case studies since the initial survey identified that 23% of participants were using email to collaborate and communicate with parents. Furthermore, two volunteers in the secondary survey identified that email had changed the way they collaborated with families. Moreover, email enables and facilitates online exchanges in an asynchronous situation and can be shared in a community of practice, it is for this reason that email was included in this study. The questions explored in each case were directly focused on participants' perceptions and their personal experiences of collaboration through the use of social media. The case studies allowed for further exploration into the characteristics and implications of social media use for educators, families and education more broadly.

Educators within each of the three cases took part in interviews to share their experiences of using social media in collaborating with families. To capture families' perspectives a family survey (Appendix B) comprising open and closed questions (Adams et al., 2007) was administered across the five settings. The family surveys were designed in Qualtrics after the establishment of the three cases, with the link to the survey circulated by educators. Survey questions included:

- General data questions (*what forms of technology do you currently use?*)
- Likert scale (Likert, 1932) questions (*on a scale of 1-10 how important do you think it is for you to collaborate with the early childhood centre?*)

- Open ended questions (*do you have any concerns about the use of social media to collaborate?*)

(Adams et al., 2007)

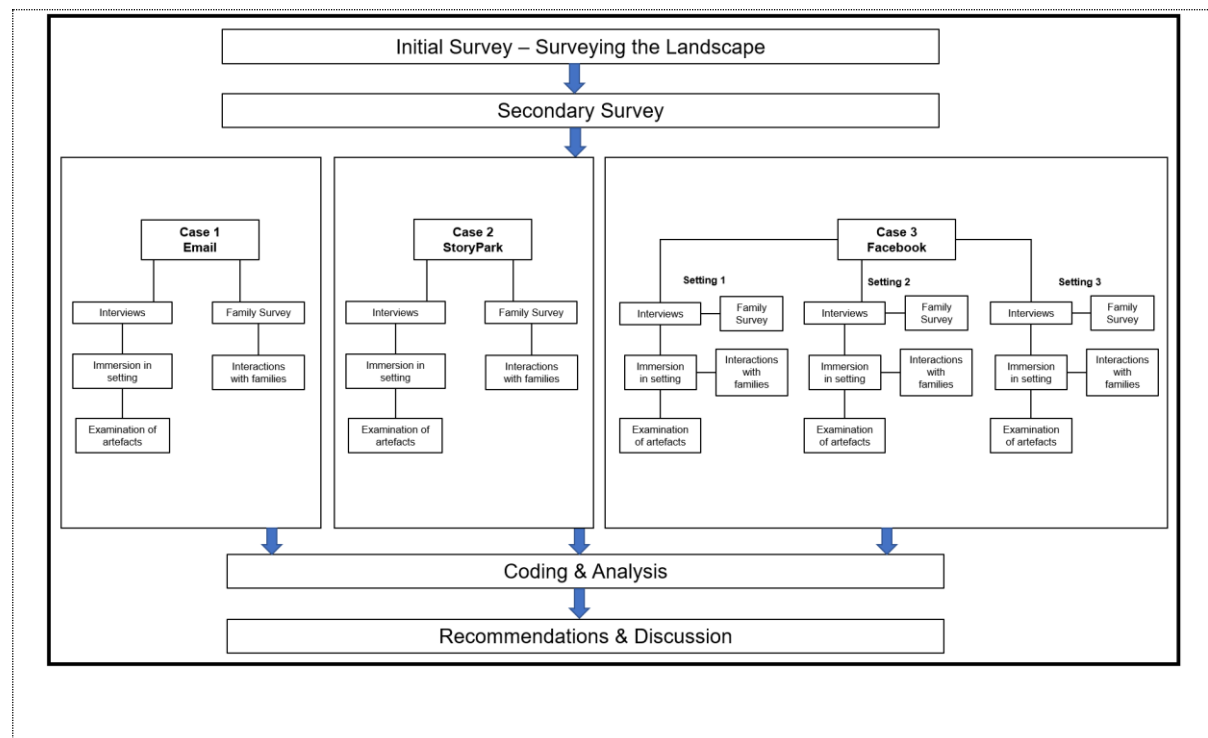
Additionally, during researcher observation in each of the case study sites the researcher held informal conversations with families which are reported as vignettes throughout the study. The survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and provided data on frequency and type of social media use, whilst the open ended questions allowed participants' to share individual perspectives on social media use.

The three case studies were built upon educator surveys, interviews and narratives derived from them, researcher observations from immersion in the settings, analysis of artefacts, and the surveys and interactions with families during immersion in each of the settings. These varied data collection formats helped ensure the triangulation of data while building a rich contextual picture of each site (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Stake, 2006).

The data collection phase and immersion in each of the case study settings took place over six months with multiple visits to each site. The length of time spent, and number of visits in each setting, varied due to the number of participants, Table 7 (p. 137) provides an overview of observations in each setting. The time of day observed in each setting was also flexible to ensure that engagement with families and incidental conversations could be included and therefore allow for a richer set of data. The initial phase involved email communication, followed by time spent in each setting, building rapport and getting to know the educators. Following this, semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) with educators took place, and observations within the setting involved both time in the room with children as well as conversations over break times. Artefacts involved sighting messages and posts from educators and families within each setting, as well as those made publicly on Facebook. The use of

artefacts as a data source allowed the researcher to view the educator's theory in practice, that is, to see how they were using social media with families in practice. Although families were invited to participate in the research via the survey distributed by the educators at each case study site, the interactions during observation periods also provided a rich source of data. Vignettes from informal conversations with families were captured during researcher observation in each of the settings, and feature throughout the findings. Figure 17 below provides an overview of the data collection phases throughout the research design. Whereas Table 6 describes the analysis of the various data sources.

**Figure 17: Overview of the data collection phase**



## Evaluation of data sources

*Table 6: Analysis of data sources*

| Evidence source  | Evidence collected                                                              | Data analysis method                                                      | Strengths                                                                                                                                                                                  | Weaknesses                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Initial survey   | Overview of collaboration in early childhood contexts                           | Quantitative & Qualitative<br>Descriptive Statistics<br>Thematic Analysis | Provides overview of sector<br>Builds understanding for the cases<br>Anonymity through Qualtrics link on Facebook, therefore participants free to answer honestly                          | Reliant upon successful design of survey instrument<br>Surveys can be inflexible - No ability to rephrase, expand or probe participant responses<br>Lack of depth<br>Sample size and generalisability |
| Secondary survey | Directed information on types of social media used in each context              | Thematic Analysis                                                         | Focus on social media allowing informed selection of cases                                                                                                                                 | Reliant upon successful design of survey instrument<br>Surveys can be inflexible - No ability to rephrase, expand or probe participant responses<br>Lack of depth<br>Sample size and generalisability |
| Interviews       | Focus information on collaborative practice in specific context                 | Qualitative<br>Transcribed data<br>Coding<br>Thematic Analysis            | Provides contextual insight<br>Customised, targeted and designed to elicit information on collaborative practice and social media. Provides useful insights and enables casual inferences. | Time consuming<br>Reflexivity - researcher presence may change responses<br>Authenticity may not be consistent                                                                                        |
| Observations     | Observations of educators in practice<br>Observations of families collaborating | Qualitative<br>Field Notes<br>Thematic Analysis                           | Authentic<br>Provides contextual insight                                                                                                                                                   | Time consuming<br>Selectivity of researcher - research may miss occurrences<br>Educators may feel under pressure therefore changing authenticity of actions                                           |
| Family Survey    | Families' experiences and perspectives in using social media to collaborate     | Quantitative & Qualitative<br>Descriptive Statistics                      | Provides overview across the 3 cases<br>Builds understanding for the cases                                                                                                                 | Reliant upon successful design of survey instrument<br>Surveys can be inflexible - No ability to rephrase, expand or                                                                                  |

|           |                                                                           |                                  |                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           |                                                                           | Thematic Analysis                | Anonymity through Qualtrics link on Facebook, therefore participants free to answer honestly | probe participant responses<br>Lack of depth<br>Sample size and generalisability                                                 |
| Artefacts | Observations of Storypark posts<br>Facebook posts<br>Email communications | Qualitative<br>Thematic Analysis | Specific targeted information<br>Authentic                                                   | Privacy<br>Limited access to Storypark due to privacy<br>Facebook posts public but no informed consent so ethical considerations |

Evaluation of data collection methods and analysis, drawn from Creswell and Clark (2018); Yin (2012)

### 3.5 Surveying the landscape: initial data collection and recruitment of participants

The initial phase of the research aimed to gain insight into the current practices employed by educators in building collaborative partnerships with families. Employing strategies outlined by Sapsford (2007) and Adam et al., (2007) survey questions were designed to draw inferences, make planned comparisons and understand patterns of social media use within a small group of early childhood educators. The research involved a link to a Qualtrics<sup>14</sup> survey posted in a private Facebook group (refer to Figure 16 above) on an early childhood Facebook page. The researcher was a member of the private Facebook group and posted the Qualtrics survey in the forum. Participants were early childhood educators who volunteered via the educator Facebook survey. Educators were asked a series of questions relating to the National Quality Standards (NQS), collaborative practices, and the use of social media. Questions 10 and 11 employed a Likert scale design (Likert, 1932) with seven alternative responses: strongly agree, agree,

---

<sup>14</sup> Qualtrics is a web-based survey tool that allows for the secure collection of data – <https://www.qualtrics.com/au/>

somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

The initial survey (Appendix A) consisted of twelve questions, as outlined below:

- Question 1 was concerned with seeking informed consent
- Question 2 asked how many years the educator had worked in the sector
- Questions 3–4 were concerned with workload under the NQS, while
- Questions 5–7 asked educators’ understandings of collaborative practice and challenges in collaborating under the NQS
- Questions 8–9 addressed their use of technology, both personally and professionally, while
- Questions 10–11 addressed the familiarity and use of social media, specifically, employing a Likert scale for educators to rate their responses
- The final question invited participants to volunteer for further research if willing and formed the basis of the cases

The secondary survey (Appendix B) consisted of nine questions as outlined below:

- Question 1 was concerned with what type of social media was being used
- Question 2 was concerned with how they used social media to collaborate
- Question 3 asked how social media influenced workload
- Question 4 was concerned with the effect of social media on partnerships with families
- Question 5 asked of any guiding principles of use
- Question 6 was concerned with inhibitors and enablers of social media use
- Question 7 was concerned with recommendations
- Question 8 asked how social media had changed relationships with families
- Question 9 was concerned with a change in educators’ work

The design of the survey questions was based on information obtained through informal interactions with educators more broadly, around their attitudes towards current workload, requirements to collaborate with families, and the ways in which they were collaborating, including the use of social media.

The initial survey intended to gain an overall snapshot of collaborative practices within the sector in Victoria and investigate the use of social media as a means for collaborating with families. Questions that asked about the length of employment in the sector and changes under the NQS were designed to examine an overall increase or decrease in workload under the new reforms such as NQS. Additionally, the survey was inclusive of open-ended questions that allowed for participants to provide their own answers and new ideas (Sapsford, 2007). The final survey question called for volunteers willing to take part in a case study delving deeper into the use of social media in their setting to collaborate with families. Seventy-five educators responded and completed the survey on their collaborative practices and use of social media with families. Seventy of the seventy-five respondents completed the online survey within forty-eight hours of it being posted on Facebook. Table 7 provides an overview of the participants in each stage of data collection, including the date and total observation time in each setting and the social media being used. Twenty-three respondents provided their email addresses and indicated a willingness to participate in the case study. Due to the high number of volunteers (23), a secondary survey (Appendix D) also administered using Qualtrics, was implemented to obtain further information on the social media platform being used in order to make an informed decision about which settings to build the cases around. Questions concerned with type of social media used, and the ways in which social media were being used provided a basis for selecting the case studies. There were no criteria that excluded participants from the cases, rather the focus was investigating a variety of platforms. Twelve of the twenty-three volunteers responded to the secondary survey, these twelve made up the participants across the five separate settings and the development of the three cases based on type of social media being used. Table 7 outlines the selection of the participants at each stage of the data collection.

***Table 7: Participants in each stage of the data collection***

| Stage of data collection | Number of educators/families                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Number of settings    | Date of interview                                                                                                                                                                        | Observations                                                                                                                                                                  | Total observation time |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Initial survey           | 75 respondents<br>23 volunteers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                               |                        |
| Secondary survey         | 12 respondents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                               |                        |
| Case one – Email         | 2 participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 1 setting             | 1: 15 November 2016                                                                                                                                                                      | 1: 21 November 2016<br>2: 6 December 2016                                                                                                                                     | 5 hours                |
| Case two – Storypark     | 4 participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 1 setting             | 1: 16 November 2016<br>2: 18 November 2016                                                                                                                                               | 1: 18 November 2016<br>2: 29 November 2016<br>3: 24 January 2017                                                                                                              | 10 hours               |
| Case three – Facebook    | 6 participants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 3 settings            | 1: 17 November 2016<br>2: 24 November 2016                                                                                                                                               | 1: 1 December 2016<br>2: 26 January 2017<br>3: 2 February 2017                                                                                                                | 12 hours               |
| Family survey            | 16 families                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Across all 5 settings | Family surveys were anonymous and provided a snapshot of collaborative practice at that time. Links to the Qualtrics survey were distributed by the educators at each of the 5 settings. |                                                                                                                                                                               |                        |
| Families across settings | 2 families in Email case:<br>◇ Edwards family<br>◇ Sparg family<br>4 families in Storypark case:<br>◇ Nguyen family<br>◇ Hernandez family<br>◇ Virgato family<br>◇ Williams family<br>3 families in Facebook case:<br>◇ McWhinney family<br>◇ Smith family<br>◇ Reilly family |                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          | Interactions with families occurred across all listed observation dates.<br><br>Informal conversations with families have been included as vignettes throughout the research. |                        |

The participants in the case studies were all female, which could be explained by the predominantly female early childhood education and care workforce. According to the 2016 Australian Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census (2017), 91.1 per cent of educators are female, with males representing only 8.9 per cent of the workforce. This reinforces that the early childhood education and care profession is a highly feminised workforce. Table 8 provides participant information on each of the five settings across the three cases, all participants have been provided pseudonyms, and will be referred to as such throughout the study.

**Table 8: Participant information**

| Case Study       | Setting                                              | Number of children enrolled | Educator's name* | Families                                   | Social media used | Gender |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Case study one   | Sessional Kindergarten in outer Melbourne, Australia | 125 children                |                  | Edwards<br>Sparg                           | Email             |        |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Rachel           |                                            | Email             | Female |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Minh             |                                            | Email             | Female |
| Case study two   | Long day care setting in inner Melbourne, Australia  | 110 children                |                  | Nguyen<br>Hernandez<br>Virgato<br>Williams | Storypark         |        |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Pareeya          |                                            | Storypark         | Female |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Anne Marie       |                                            | Storypark         | Female |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Georgia          |                                            | Storypark         | Female |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Fatima           |                                            | Storypark         | Female |
| Case study three | 3 different settings                                 |                             |                  | McWhinney<br>Smith<br>Reilly               | Facebook          |        |
|                  |                                                      |                             | Vanna            |                                            | Facebook          | Female |

|           |                                                                    |              |          |  |          |        |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|----------|--|----------|--------|
| Setting 1 | Small sessional kindergarten in outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne | 34 children  | Natalie  |  | Facebook | Female |
| Setting 2 | Small sessional kindergarten in south eastern suburbs of Melbourne | 66 children  | Maddison |  | Facebook | Female |
|           |                                                                    |              | Maria    |  | Facebook | Female |
| Setting 3 | Long day care setting in regional Victoria, Australia              | 285 children | Elly     |  | Facebook | Female |
|           |                                                                    |              | Karen    |  | Facebook | Female |

\*Names are pseudonyms so that individual participants cannot be identified

### 3.6 The cases

The case studies were designed based on the social media platform adopted to best address the aims of the research and investigate opportunities across a range of platforms. They were derived from information received from both the initial and secondary survey and were:

- 1) One site that used email to build collaborative partnerships with families
- 2) One site that used the app Storypark to build collaborative partnerships with families
- 3) Three sites that represented different types of Facebook use to build collaborative partnerships with families.

As established, the three case studies were selected by the platform of social media use – email, Storypark and Facebook. It is acknowledged that email is not a form of social media. However,

email is included for the purposes of this research as educators involved in the study perceived email to be influential in terms of electronic communication. They perceived email to be comparable to social media in terms of functionality that allows texts, videos, photos and images to be shared with families in an immediate way. Therefore, although email is not a form of social media, for the purposes of this research it is used in a linear way, similar to that of Storypark and Facebook, hence its inclusion in the research. Information was gathered from each setting in order to address the overarching research questions of collaborative practice. Investigating social media and collaboration through a range of social media platforms added another layer of complexity and allowed for comparison between cases. Each case discusses collaboration in terms of the emerging themes: Immediacy and access, Content of collaborations, Inbound and outbound communication, and Privacy and ownership. These themes were established during the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview transcripts and are used to frame and discuss the findings across all three cases.

### **3.7 Case study one – email**

Case study one investigated the use of email as a means of collaborating with families in the early years setting.

#### **3.7.1 Setting and participants**

Case study one took place in a kindergarten setting in an inner northern suburb of Melbourne, Australia. The kindergarten was solely community-run and not-for-profit (refer to 2.2.4) offering kindergarten programs for children aged three to five. It operates as a double unit, meaning that it offers both three-year-old activity groups and fully funded four-year-old kindergarten programs for approximately 125 children across a five-day week. The participants in this setting include educators and families connected to the four-year-old kindergarten program. Parents in this setting agree to share email addresses with the educators and

correspond accordingly. All participants are referred to using pseudonyms as outlined in Table 8.

### **3.7.2 The use of email to build collaborative partnerships with families**

Although email is not traditionally considered a social media platform, the educators in this case have used email to build collaborative partnerships in the setting. Participants felt that the technology associated with email and social media directly related to their change in collaborative practices, hence its inclusion as a type of social media for the purposes of this case study. The email platform used in this setting was Microsoft Outlook<sup>15</sup>.

## **3.8 Case study two – Storypark**

Case study two investigated the use of Storypark<sup>16</sup> as a means of collaborating with families in the early years setting.

### **3.8.1 Setting and participants**

This setting is based in inner-city Melbourne, Australia, and is operated by a large not-for-profit Early Years Manager (refer to 2.2.4). It offers long day care<sup>17</sup> and a three- and four-year-old kindergarten program. This centre had 110 children enrolled in 2017. The participants in this setting include educators and families connected to the four-year-old kindergarten program (refer to 2.2.4) but was also inclusive of families and children within the long day care component of the setting. There were four educators in this setting that took part in this research

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<sup>15</sup> <https://outlook.live.com/owa/>

<sup>16</sup> Storypark is an easy-to-use private online service that helps teachers, parents, and families work together to record, share, and extend children's learning. You can capture a child's development by posting photos, videos, stories, moments, notes, and responses – <https://help.storypark.com/en/articles/56143-what-is-storypark>

<sup>17</sup> Long day care, which is childcare provided in a formalised setting, often known as early learning centres, and is available for working families, those studying or those who need some respite time. It typically caters for children aged six weeks until school-aged – <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/child-care-kindergarten/Pages/types-of-child-care.aspx>

(refer to Table 8). This setting offers both kindergarten and long day care programs across a five-day week.

### **3.8.2 The use of Storypark to build collaborative partnerships with families**

In case study two Storypark is mandated by the Early Years Manager and all staff are required to engage its use with families. Management and educators' intent of Storypark in this setting is based around documenting children's learning, making this visible to families, and building collaborative partnerships with each family. According to educators within the setting, Storypark has replaced traditional methods of collaboration and documentation, such as newsletters and learning stories.

According to Storypark (2018), Storypark has the functionality to allow posts and content to be shared privately with individual families or in group spaces. Individual children's documentation and learning goals are sent privately to families, while other information is shared within whole group spaces. For example, a learning story that is focused on one particular child would be sent to only that family; however, a video of a group of children engaging in messy play might be posted in a group space allowing multiple families to view and comment. Educators in this setting make decisions regarding what is posted in shared spaces and what is posted to individual families. Families have their own profiles and therefore decide whom they share their profile with. For example, they can decide to share the content of their profile with a grandparent overseas. The functionality of Storypark allows educators and families to communicate via an online platform.

### **3.9 Case study three – Facebook**

Case study three investigated the use of Facebook as a means of collaborating with families in the early years setting. It encompasses three different and separate settings within the one case example.

#### **3.9.1 Setting and participants**

This case study comprised three separate early years settings that are using Facebook to collaborate with families. The focus of the case is based on the different uses of Facebook – public, private and private messaging usage. Thus, this third case encompasses three different early childhood sites.

Setting one: A small kindergarten located in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, offering a four-year-old program. This kindergarten has recently been taken over by a large Early Years Manager (refer to 2.2.4), replacing a community-run kindergarten; however it still has a parent committee of management for fundraising and social purposes. There were two educators in this setting, Vanna and Natalie, who took part in this research (refer to Table 8). This setting had thirty-four children enrolled in 2017 and operated over a three-day period per week.

Setting two: A kindergarten located in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, offering both a three- and four-year-old funded kindergarten program. The kindergarten is entirely operated under a not-for-profit parent committee of management (refer to 2.2.4). There were two educators in this setting, Maddison and Maria, who took part in this research (refer to Table 8). This setting had sixty-six children enrolled in 2017.

Setting three: A long day care centre located in regional Victoria offering both four-year-old kindergarten and government-subsidised childcare. This centre is privately owned and run, a

for-profit organisation (refer to 2.2.4). There were two educators in this setting, Elly and Karen, who took part in this research (refer to Table 8). This setting had 285 children enrolled in 2017.

### 3.9.2 The different ways Facebook is used to build collaborative partnerships with families

Social networking site Facebook allows users to share photos, post comments and links to news and events, live chat, and stream video. According to LifeWire (2019), “shared content can be made publicly accessible, or it can be shared only among a select group of friends or family, or with a single person” (2019, para. 2).

The table below (Table 9) outlines the different privacy settings and explains the difference between public and private Facebook pages. This is relevant in the context of this study as the uses of Facebook and privacy settings vary throughout each of the three early-years settings within case three.

**Table 9: Privacy settings on Facebook**

|                                                                | Public             | Private            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Who can see what members post, comment and share in the group? | Anyone             | Current Members    |
| Who can see the list of members in the group?                  | People on Facebook | Current Members    |
| Who can see who the admins and moderators are?                 | People on Facebook | People on Facebook |

Use of Facebook in setting one: The educator in this setting used a private Facebook page to collaborate with families. She rated her technology skills as low and did not engage with technology outside of her professional role. The Facebook page was managed by the committee of management, with the educators having administrator permissions. In setting one, only

current families who were enrolled in the service were allowed to be members of the Facebook page.

Use of Facebook in setting two: This setting used an open Facebook page to collaborate with families. Anybody could join the page, and the page consisted of a combination of existing and pre-existing families as well as some unknown members. Educators within this setting also used their personal Facebook accounts with some families, as they were Facebook friends<sup>18</sup>. The use of private messaging<sup>19</sup> via Facebook to communicate with families in the setting is also used by some educators.

Use of Facebook in setting three: This was a large setting that operates through age groupings and classifies itself within four or five named rooms. Educators within each room choose how they collaborate with families, and some have adopted Facebook as one strategy. There is also a common Facebook page for the whole setting for the purposes of promotion and advertising. This setting has both public and private Facebook pages in operation. Some educators within this setting also use their personal Facebook accounts with some families in the setting as they are Facebook friends. The use of private messaging on Facebook was also used by some educators.

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<sup>18</sup> When you add someone as a Facebook friend, you automatically follow that person, and they automatically follow you. This means you may see each other's posts in News Feed – <https://www.facebook.com/help/community/question/?id=10210241653906559>

<sup>19</sup> A secret conversation in Messenger that is encrypted end-to-end, which means the messages are intended just for the sender and recipient – <https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/1084673321594605/>

### **3.10 Interviews, observations and artefacts**

At each case study site, educator interviews were audio-recorded, with permission, to gain an insight into participants' experiences with using social media to collaborate with families. Interview questions were semi-structured to allow for natural conversation and additional data to emerge (Appendix C). The semi-structured interview question design was based upon the findings of the surveys and allowed for further investigation of themes that emerged in the surveys. The semi-structured approach (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Sapsford, 2007) allowed an in-depth examination of issues and assisted in directing conversation that addressed the research questions, as well as enabling participants to share their stories. For example, educators were asked what practices they used to collaborate with families. In answering this, educators often provided more detail that then led to further questioning and examples of practice. Observations in the form of field notes were gathered from both educator interviews, immersion in the setting, and observation of the social media sites themselves. Storypark profiles and some information was not electronically captured due to privacy and permissions. Educator observations and social media sites (excluding personal Storypark accounts) were used as research artefacts to examine interaction and collaboration between families and the early years setting.

The use of observation as a research method allowed the researcher an insight into educator's practices, interactions, and everyday use of social media within their natural surroundings. Observation as a data gathering technique ranges from passive spectator to active participant (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In this study the researcher aimed for a minimally participatory role whereby observation occurred mainly as a passive spectator, with the exception of natural interactions such as those occurring with children and families.

Observations within each of the case study sites provided a lens in which to view naturally unfolding events such as interactions between educators and collaborations with families. Similarly, being present

and observing naturally occurring phenomena allowed the researcher to “follow the data” (Drew et al., 2008, p5) further questioning and refining. Throughout observations in each of the case study settings field notes were recorded in a researcher journal which included thoughts, questions and informal conversations with educator’s and families. Observations were recorded as field notes in real time, or as soon after as practicable to ensure understanding and accuracy.

### **3.11 Family perspectives**

As previously discussed, refer to section 3.4.1, to ensure that families' voices were also heard, families at all settings were invited to participate in an online survey to share their experiences of using social media to collaborate with their educational setting. Educators in each case setting circulated the family survey (Appendix B) using a link to an online Qualtrics survey provided by the researcher. The family survey included both closed and open ended questions (Sapsford, 2007). They were designed to assist understanding the family's level of satisfaction with the collaborative practices used in the setting, and the influence of social media on partnerships from parent perspective. There were sixteen families across all three case studies that responded to the survey. Surveys were anonymous and therefore it cannot be ascertained if the same families who completed the surveys also took part in informal interactions with the researcher during observation in the setting. Both the data from the family survey and vignettes from informal interactions have been used to provide a thick description of families' experiences of using social media to collaborate.

During researcher observations and immersion in the setting, families provided additional information on their use of social media and the collaborative practices employed by the setting in conversation with the researcher. Parents disclosed their overall satisfaction and anecdotal feedback on the type and frequency of communications. To ensure the privacy of the family, pseudonyms have been used throughout the research when discussing vignettes, Table 7 (p. 138) outlines the families within each setting. Ethics approval was provided for the family

survey and informal discussions during researcher observations. Family interaction occurred informally within the environment of the early childhood setting and, therefore, in a public space. However, although informal conversations took place between the researcher and parent in a public space, the physical spaces in which these conversations took place provided a degree of privacy.

### **3.12 Data analysis methods**

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to capture the trends and details within the cases. Data was drawn from the surveys, interviews, educator narratives, social media artefacts, family surveys and reflective sources. Social media posts and policy documents were used as artefacts and allowed for a more in-depth understanding relevant to the contextual setting in each case. All case study sites provided access to posts while the researcher was onsite. Additionally, case one forwarded example emails to the researcher, case two allowed onsite viewing of Storypark, and case three provided screenshots and access to Facebook posts. Given the emergent nature of qualitative research, data analysis commenced after the initial survey to allow for early findings to shape the nature of the interviews and further data collection. The process of data collection was deductive and reflexive in nature, with the data analysed using descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, the following section provides a discussion of the different data analysis methods employed in each stage of the data collection, which allowed for a thick description of the data.

#### **3.12.1 Descriptive statistics**

The initial educator survey contained both closed and open ended questions and was designed to provide a snapshot of collaborative practices at the time. The closed question responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008). Descriptive statistics were

particularly useful for this first process of data analysis as they allowed for a description of collaborative practice to be considered, providing a summary determining average length of time in sector, increase in workload and types and frequencies of social media use. Analysis was accomplished using the Qualtrics software with both descriptive and inferential analysis performed with data summarised and presented in a number of ways, raw numerical data, percentages, tables and graphs. For example, questions 3 and 4 were concerned with increase in workload, using descriptive statistics Qualtrics provided raw data, tables and graphs of the findings (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.1). The qualitative open ended survey questions were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis generated a rich body of data that allowed for the research questions to be addressed and enabled participants voices to be heard.

### **3.12.2 Thematic analysis**

Using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), items in the initial surveys, secondary surveys, semi-structured interviews, observations and artefacts were continually revisited, organised and compared, and analysed. According to Nowell et al. (2017), thematic analysis is a method that allows for “identifying, analysing, organizing and describing and reporting themes found within a data set” (p. 2). Similarly, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), thematic analysis provides a useful approach to summarising key features within research data. They assert that the use of thematic analysis allows for multiple perspectives of research participants to be heard, and highlights similarities and differences while uncovering unknown patterns. Therefore, thematic analysis was applied to this research study to examine the participants' multiple perspectives, highlighting the similarities and differences in the use of social media and uncovering unknown patterns.

Data was coded using frequently emerging themes guided by existing literature on collaborative partnerships and social media. The themes that emerged from the interviews were further supported by analysing the artefacts, which were interrogated for the identified themes, and used as a triangulation method to provide a rich contextual picture (Creswell & Clarke, 2018). Applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process for thematic analysis as outlined in Table 10, demonstrates the way in which data was analysed in this study.

**Table 10: Phases of Thematic Analysis**

| Phase                                   | Description of the process                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Familiarising yourself with the data | Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data                                                                             |
| 2. Generating initial codes             | Coding emerging/ interesting features of the data in a systematic way across the data set                                      |
| 3. Searching for themes                 | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to the potential themes                                     |
| 4. Reviewing themes                     | Checking if the theme does in fact work in relation to the extracts, generating a thematic map                                 |
| 5. Defining and naming themes           | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics, generating clear definitions and names for themes                                    |
| 6. Producing the report                 | The final opportunity for analysis. Selecting vivid and compelling examples of the themes to be used as extracts in the report |

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Coding was performed manually involving colour coding methods throughout the transcripts to identify patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, interview transcripts were analysed for commonly occurring words, which were then coded according to emerging themes (Appendix H). Table 11 provides an example of the thematic analysis used throughout the data analysis stage.

**Table 11: Example of thematic analysis employed in analysing qualitative data**

| Indicative responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Codes                                                                                                          | Themes                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <p><b>Speed and convenience</b></p> <p>It's an immediate connection between what the children are interested in and doing, the program, and the families. You can't get that any other way (Case 1, email).</p> <p>Often it is from those families that can't be here. It's from the partners that don't do the drop offs and pick ups so that they feel included in that program. It gives them a spark of something to talk about around the dinner table (Case 2, Storypark).</p> <p>Storypark allows me to work from home. I no longer have to be at the centre to do my non-contact time (Case 2, Storypark).</p> <p>Some teachers don't respond to families after hours but sharing with families and answering their questions is so important, it is part of our jobs (Case 2, Storypark).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <p><i>Fast</i><br/><i>Quick</i><br/><i>Freedom</i><br/><i>After hours</i></p>                                  | <p>Immediacy and access</p>      |
| <p><b>The types of communications</b></p> <p>This week we have had an interest in making perfumes and potions, and I can put out immediately to those families and say look this is what is going on, the children are really interested – could you bring in some flowers on your way to kindergarten or some herbs from the garden. They do! (Case 1, email).</p> <p>When we get an assessment and rating visit, it will be all simple, everything is there. We can show our program, observations and interactions with families. I'm not sure what we would do if they came when we had no internet (Case 2, Storypark).</p> <p>Say – just a couple of things, this week blah, blah blah, and remember that ... see you on Thursday. Whereas if I was trying to translate that into a newsletter, it becomes more formal, or I send out an A3 page with three sentences on it and feel the need to fill it up so it becomes long and it's more work (Case 1, email).</p> <p>If I FB what I normally put in their portfolio, say for like a learning story, then I am meeting my requirements for individual documentation for the assessment and rating visit, and I am sharing it with the parents, so I am meeting that one too (Case 3, Facebook).</p> | <p><i>Curriculum</i><br/><i>Planning</i><br/><i>Documenting</i><br/><i>Observations</i><br/><i>Sharing</i></p> | <p>Content of collaborations</p> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                      |                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Communications sent and received by educators</b></p> <p>With SM, we are kind of on call. It is part of the service as well ... not that we are a 24-hr service, but through FB you get those messages from families at 11 pm that really want to have an answer before their child comes back in at 7 am (Case 3, Facebook).</p> <p>Parent to centre, centre to families, educators to families and back to educators, families to families, and occasionally children to centre/educators (Case 2, Storypark).</p> <p>I think it makes communication more streamlined, and it is a one-stop process that reaches the maximum number of families. So, in some respects, it lessens the workload (Case 1, email).</p> | <p><i>Sent by educators</i><br/><i>Responses</i><br/><i>One way</i><br/><i>Families</i><br/><i>contributions</i></p> | <p>Inbound &amp; outbound communication</p> |
| <p><b>Issues around privacy and ownership</b></p> <p>We have around 70 followers, and the majority are our families, but when I have looked through, we have about 7 or 8 that we have no idea who they are. We also have 6 or 7 past families, people who wanted to stay in touch with the kinder. I think it's good that people can see what we do, we are showing them the importance of kindergarten (Case 3, Facebook).</p> <p>I don't think anyone cares if there are ads and promos on the page, you can just scroll through it. We should be supporting local business as sometimes we ask them for stuff for fundraising and that, so it's not an issue for our community (Case 3, Facebook).</p>                  | <p><i>Digital Footprint</i><br/><i>Security</i><br/><i>Privacy</i></p>                                               | <p>Privacy and ownership</p>                |

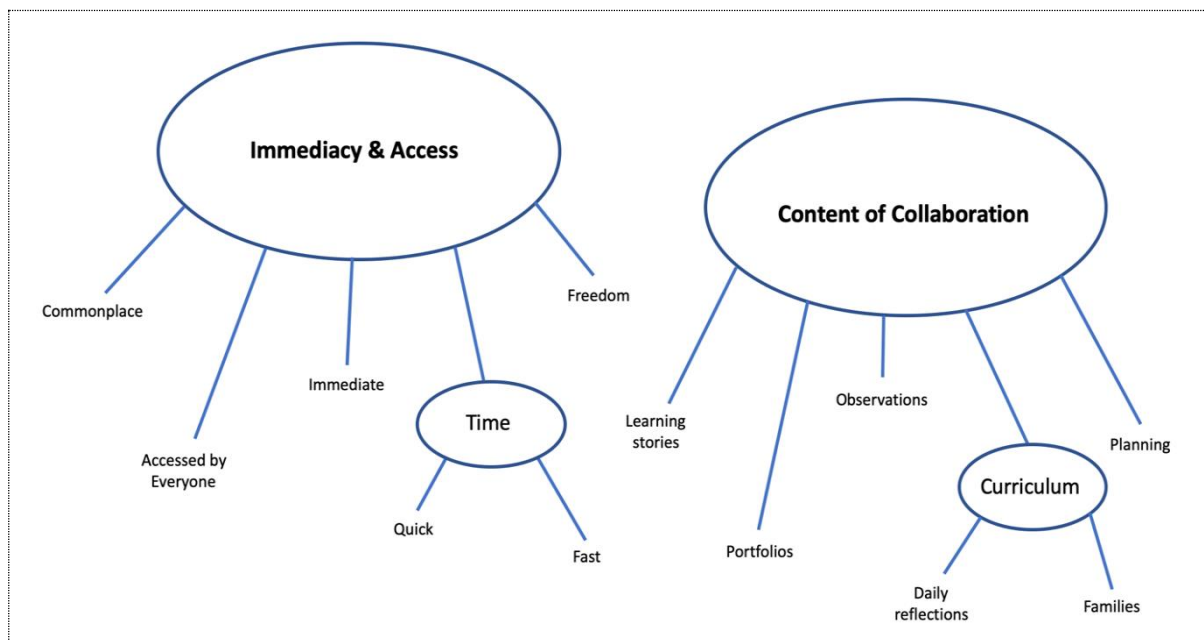
The aim of the coding was to identify particular features of each of the items that constituted the particular data set. Themes were selected by both their prevalence across the data, and their importance in addressing the research question. Themes were not necessarily selected as they were the most prevalent across the data (frequency), rather, as they captured the most essential elements and best addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, in the educator interviews workload was not mentioned as frequently as curriculum, however workload was frequently described as being an essential element in discussing how educators' roles had changed. Once the coding had occurred the relationships between codes and the identification of themes took place, Figure 18 demonstrates step four of Braun and Clarke's (2006) process, a thematic map using the identified codes and themes. Some initial codes went

on to form themes or sub-themes, with themes then reviewed. Subsequently, commonly occurring words were ‘immediate’, ‘fast’, ‘quick’ and ‘instant’, which led to the code of immediacy and access. The codes used to compare and analyse the data and discuss the research findings were:

- immediacy and access
- content of collaborations
- inbound and outbound communication
- privacy and ownership

These themes were continually refined throughout the analysis and writing process, which required the selection of themes and codes to best represent the story of each case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Vignettes to support these themes are used throughout.

**Figure 18: Thematic map used in analysis**



The analysis was emergent and generative, with the approach being one of clarifying the data without losing its complexity in each case (Morehouse, 2012). Data from the survey, participant interviews, observations and artefacts enabled multiple sources to be continually

analysed throughout the writing phase. The lens of Third Space Theory was applied to each of these themes and allowed for data to be analysed within each space. For example, when examining immediacy and access, the lens of first space allowed for traditional collaboration practices (old) to be analysed, second space was social media (new) as a stand-alone, while the third space allowed new practices to emerge when combining the old with the new, equalling a hybridity of new knowledge and practice.

For the analysis of the social media artefacts, the use of thematic analysis was similarly employed. The use of thematic analysis in this research study allowed for emails, Facebook posts and Storypark to be analysed for common themes in the written form, in the same way to that of the interview transcripts.

### **3.13 Ethical considerations**

This research involved human participants, and data collection methods employed consisted of surveys and interviews; therefore, ethics approval was required. Ethical considerations including informed consent, withdrawal, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, and secure storage of data have been considered. In this study, all participants were provided a plain language statement and informed consent was an ethical requirement. At all stages of the study participants were invited to ask questions to ensure they understood all aspects of the research. Involvement in the study was confidential and voluntary. Participants choose freely to be included in the research by volunteering through the initial survey and throughout the interviews and researcher observation in the setting. Interviews took place in a setting familiar to the participant and at times convenient to them, to assist in providing participants with power and agency. At each stage of the data collection participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation and were free to withdraw at any time. Interview transcripts were member checked for accuracy and participants confirmed their understand and willingness to

participate in the study throughout. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. To ensure anonymity all participants were provided pseudonyms and are referred to by these throughout the research. As with any research undertaken ethically, participants had the right to not to take part in the study, or to withdraw at any time.

An additional important consideration in this study was the role of the researcher in the research. The researcher was concerned with exploring the possibilities of social media use and therefore had no predetermined hypothesis. The research was flexible and emergent. Although there were no direct dominant power relationships between the researcher and participants, it must be acknowledged that in any research the potential for inequality of power is present. Whilst the semi structured interviews allowed participants to speak freely, participants' may feel intimidated or judged in their responses. For this reason, the interviews were posed in a non-threatening way, and in a relaxed setting familiar to the participant. Through the use of observation within each of the case study settings it was hoped that the participants would feel more at ease when sharing experiences of social media use.

This research was undertaken ethically and with the required ethics approval (Ethics number HRE16-214), (Appendix E). As this research originally commenced at Victoria University, ethics approval was provided by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, and consent to participate was completed by all research participants.

### **3.13.1 Ethical use of social media**

Literature on the methodology of conducting online research is growing (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012; Hammersley & Traianou, 2016; McCarron, 2013); however, the use of social media as part of research is relatively new and presents a range of ethical implications. According to Alufasian et al. (2017) and Kane, Alavi, Labianca, and Borgatti (2014), social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram contain a vast amount of information and can be a rich

source of data for researchers. From participant recruitment to online interviewing, using online discussions or mining posts to gather data, social media offers rich opportunities, yet the ethical implications of accessing and using this data are also vast (Kane et al., 2014; Moore, Pym, & Ioannidis, 2010).

Therefore, in relation to this research, the ethical collection of data was carefully considered. In applying a framework presented by Sieber and Tolich (2013), there are two components to consider in ethical research – a) the degree of harm that may occur, and b) the likelihood of this occurring. Sieber and Tolich (2013) discuss vulnerability and risk regarding participants' involvement in research with the underlying principle being that risk refers to the probability of a negative outcome, whereas vulnerability refers to a person's position or ability to understand, evaluate or refuse that risk. In applying these components to this research study, a) the degree of harm that may occur was low, and b) the likelihood of this occurring was also low.

### **3.13.2 Informed consent**

Informed consent (Appendices F and G) is based on the ethical underpinning of autonomy, that all people should have the right to fully understand what is being asked of them, what the risks are, and that they are free to withdraw at any time so that they can determine if they wish to participate in the research (Farrell, 2005).

In regard to social media and informed consent, there are conflicting views. According to Stevens et al. (2015), what constitutes public or private spaces in a virtual space is open for debate. They assert that because something is of a private nature does not mean that it is private information. Therefore, regardless of the source of the data, personal information that can be accessed without site membership can be considered as the public domain. Consequently, while contributors may post to public spaces, they may be unaware that these posts will be used for

research purposes, therefore, raising ethical issues of informed consent to use information (Stevens et al., 2015). Henderson, Johnson and Auld (2013) conducted a review of peer-reviewed research papers published since 2008 that involved the use of social media in the research process. They found that one-third of the papers did not disclose whether they had ethics approval, eight mentioned they had ethics approval but provided no detail, and four indicated that ethics was not required as social media content is information in the public domain and therefore does not require participants to sign informed consent (Henderson et al., 2013).

Consequently, the use of social media posts as artefacts in this research has been carefully considered, with content only being included when participants could remain anonymous. Although these artefacts were publicly available due to lack of privacy restrictions on Facebook pages, not all have been included in this research. The inclusion of some social media artefacts was based on individual privacy settings, which indicated whether or not data was in the public domain, and whether participants could remain de-identifiable. In some instances, artefacts were excluded where images of children are present, or it was felt that the nature of the content could reasonably require informed consent. In addition, all identifying features have been removed from posts so that educator and setting anonymity can be upheld. Research artefacts such as Facebook posts from the case studies were used in a limited capacity, and only where participants could not be identified and the data met the ethical obligations of this research. The use of artefacts in this study had formal approval from the research ethics committee (Ethics number HRE16-214), (Appendix E).

### **3.14 Limitations of design**

This research contributes to understanding the opportunities social media may present in collaborative practice within ECEC. However, as with any research design, there are

limitations that must be acknowledged. The use of a case study design allowed rich descriptions of participants to be included, yet limited the number of participants and settings that could be included under the realistic timeframe of a PhD study. Although the educator survey responses in this research were positive with seventy-five respondents, the family perspectives survey was not as well received. To address this, observations within the setting and informal interactions with families provided the researcher insight and the ability to capture families' perspectives. However, it must be acknowledged that due to the small sample size of families who participated in this study, only some families' views and experiences are presented. A larger sample size of families would have provided a more realistic representation of families' perspectives.

According to Stark and Torrance (2005), the strength of a case study is that it allows for an in-depth exploration of a setting and the participants' experiences and perspectives within that setting. Subsequently, employing various data collection methods to explore the case can allow for a 'rich' description from the participants themselves. Likewise, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) present an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of case study design. They assert that there are key strengths when using case study methodology including understanding complex relationships, exploration of the unexpected and unusual and the facilitation of rich conceptual and theoretical knowledge. However, they also assert that the limitations of case study methodology are a valid consideration. The limitation of case study design as discussed by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) include: vast quantities of data that are problematic in terms of numerical representation, complexity of data may be difficult to represent in a meaningful and simple way, lack of researcher objectivity, and that findings are not generalisable in the conventional sense.

In relation to this research, there are considerations on both the strengths and limitations arguments inherent to the study. Applying Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2001) framework, all

arguments for the strengths of case study methodology were present in this research study, and therefore validate its use as the research methodology. Juxtaposing this claim, the limitations inherent in this research are centred around generalisability; findings are not generalisable in the conventional sense. The case study approach means that generalisations cannot be made across settings or broader populations from the limited data sets gained from a small number of in-depth cases. Similarly, Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) discuss the limitations of case study design in terms of sample size, which is problematic as qualitative research focuses on examining unique phenomena within a detailed and specific context. However, Stake (2006) argues that naturalistic generalisation can often be applied in similar settings where populations or circumstances may be statistically representative. Naturalistic generalisations allow for personalised functional application where circumstances may be similar, and comparisons intuitively occur. Furthermore, case studies are dependent upon the specificities of time and place, and neither a researcher nor reader can replicate the study; they can only present the context and allow for others to learn from it (Stake, 2006; Stark & Torrance, 2005).

It is for this reason that this research was designed to examine the specific uses of social media across three case studies. It does not proclaim to make generalisations about the use of social media in the sector as a whole. It may, however, provide an opportunity for stakeholders to reflect upon their current practice concerning collaborative partnerships.

Furthermore, according to Harland (2014), knowledge can enter a collective accumulation and this transfer of knowledge may form part of a cumulative argument based on similar ideas presented by many. He asserts that initial learning from a case may prompt reflection and integration of new ideas that consequently affect change. Similarly, Eisner (1997) asserts that “one of the most useful of human abilities is the ability to learn from the experiences of others. We do not need to learn everything first hand” (Eisner, 1997, p. 202). There is a range of ways that people learn, and learning through others’ examples of practice may be applicable in some

contexts. Consequently, educators within the field of early childhood education and care may transfer ideas and knowledge that emerged in this research, to their particular context. An underpinning principle of this research was that of an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary approach, in the fact that the findings do not propose that old ways of collaborating be superseded with new ways. Rather, its intent, which is enhanced through the use of Third Space methodology, is that old and new practices can coexist, and that social media may offer a hybrid and emerging collaborative practice. Consequently, applying the Third Space lens to the cases allowed for new ways of thinking to emerge, therefore supporting Harland's (2014) culmination of knowledge and Eisner's (1997) learning from experience to enact change.

### **3.15 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduced the aims, research questions, theoretical framework and methodological design for this research project. A case study design was discussed and justified as the methodological approach. The theoretical framework of Third Space was explained and a summary of the historical context was presented. The use of Third Space has been used broadly in research and specifically has precedent in educational research. This use of Third Space Theory in educational research was discussed, and aligned to the context of this research. A case study methodology was employed in this research as it enabled an in-depth analysis of how social media was being used within three specific cases. The use of Third Space Theory as the theoretical framework allowed for new possibilities to emerge while ensuring that an inclusionary not exclusionary approach was adopted. The research methods were presented, and a discussion on the data collection and analysis of data was provided. Each of the three cases was presented, outlining the use of email, Storypark and Facebook, including the setting and participants for each case. The rationale for the collection method of survey, interviews and artefacts was provided alongside a discussion of why capturing families' voices was deemed necessary. The chapter concluded with a summary of the ethical implications and

limitations of the research design. The following chapter provides the findings of the initial survey and the three case studies.

## **4 Chapter four: Findings**

### **4.1 Chapter overview**

The aim of this research was to examine how the use of social media might provide new opportunities for collaborative practice with families in early years settings. This chapter presents the findings from the initial survey and second survey, and presents the data from the three case studies. The findings of the educator surveys are discussed using descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008) and based on the themes identified through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as outlined in Chapter 3, section 3.12. Following this, the findings from each of the cases, the family surveys, artefacts and researcher observations are discussed using the themes that emerged through the thematic analysis. The chapter then presents an analysis and discussion of the three case studies including examination of social media artefacts and family surveys and conversations.

The discussion of the data is organised under the following headings:

1. Surveying the landscape (initial and secondary surveys with educators)
2. Case Study One: the use of email
3. Case Study Two: the use of Storypark
4. Case Study Three: the different uses of Facebook
5. Family Perspectives: discussed broadly across all three cases
6. The findings through a narrative of quality

The perspectives of families are discussed broadly across all three cases – email, Storypark and Facebook – as they share commonalities, however, vignettes from individual families add value to each of the cases individually. The narrative of quality became an overriding consideration

throughout the findings and therefore this chapter concludes with a narrative of quality across the study.

## **4.2 Surveying the landscape**

The aim of the initial phase of the research was to gain an insight into the current practices employed by educators in building collaborative partnerships with families. Seventy-five educators completed the survey regarding their collaborative practice and use of social media with families. As discussed in the methods chapter, the initial survey was posted on a private Facebook group. It was composed of twelve questions (Appendix A) that sought to gain insights into the educators' existing collaborative practice with families. Ninety per cent (n=67) of respondents completed the survey within forty-eight hours of it being posted on the Facebook page. As outlined in Chapter 3, section 3.12, the first phase of the data analysis of the initial survey employed descriptive statistics (Drew et al., 2008) and allowed for quantitative data to be summarised succinctly, such as in the case of average length of time in the sector and types of social media begin used. Following this, the open ended qualitative questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings from the survey questions will be discussed using both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis as it allows educators' perceptions to be presented in a number of ways. The nature of the twelve questions in the initial survey (refer to Chapter 3, section 3.5) influenced the development of themes in the findings, for example, questions 3–4 were concerned with workload, while questions 5–7 pertained to understandings of collaborative practice, hence the themes that emerged in educators' responses. Survey results and educators' responses are presented and discussed using the following themes:

- 4.1.1 Collaborative practice under the NQS (Questions 2, 3 & 4)
- 4.1.2 Definitions of collaborative practice from the sector (Question 5)

- 4.1.3 Current collaborative practices employed (Questions 6, 9, 10 & 11)
- 4.1.4 Collaboration and curriculum (Questions 5 & 10)
- 4.1.5 The role of the educator and of the family (Questions 5 & 7)
- 4.1.6 Workload implications (Questions 3, 4 & 10)

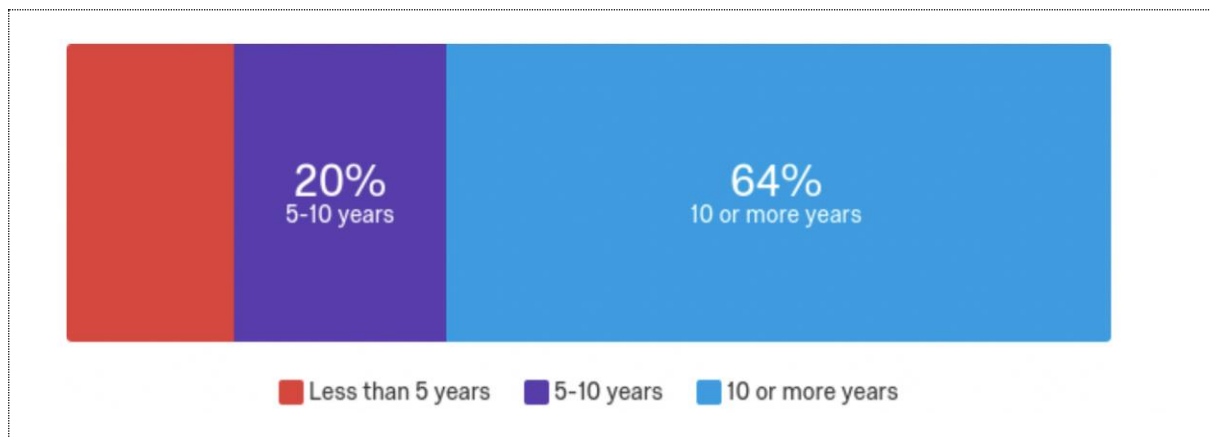
### **4.2.1 Participants**

Initial survey design was concerned with collecting a snapshot of educators' perceptions of collaborative practices. Questions were designed to get a picture of the current landscape within the ECEC sector with regard to workload, collaborative practice, social media and the National Quality Standards (NQS). The initial survey findings provided a snapshot of educators' collaborative practice from the sector.

Ninety per cent of respondents completed the survey within forty-eight hours of it being posted on the Facebook page. This is relevant in the context of this research as it provides insight into the working hours of educators, which is further explored in Chapters 4 and 5. The majority of educators (67 per cent) (n=50) who completed the survey indicated that they had been in the ECEC sector for ten years or more and that compliance workload had increased since the introduction of the NQS. Figure 19 identifies the length of service in ECEC and Figure 20 depicts the perceived increase in workload. It is significant that 75 per cent (n=50) of survey respondents indicated that their workload had increased since the introduction of the NQS. Educator workload is further discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.2.

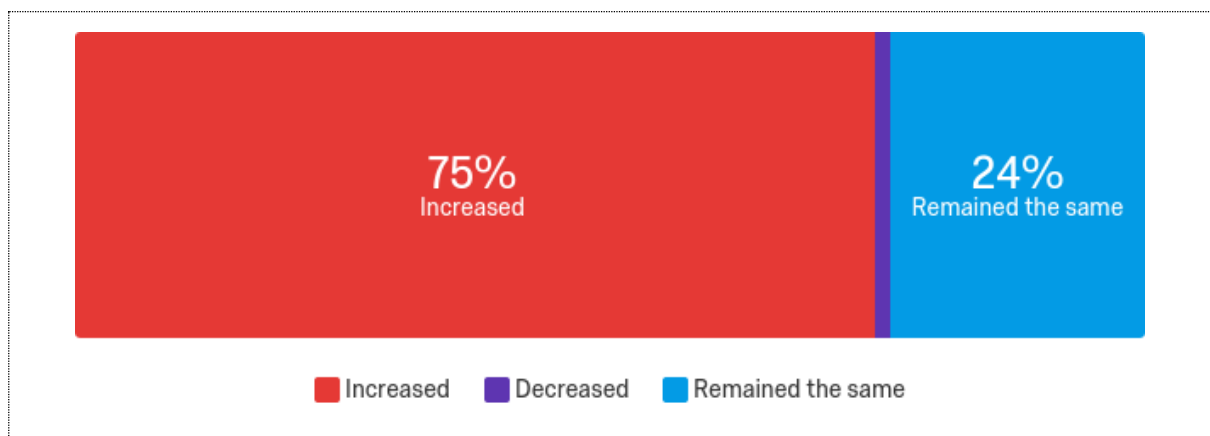
**Figure 19: Length of service in early childhood education and care**

Question 2



**Figure 20: Changes to workload under the National Quality Standards**

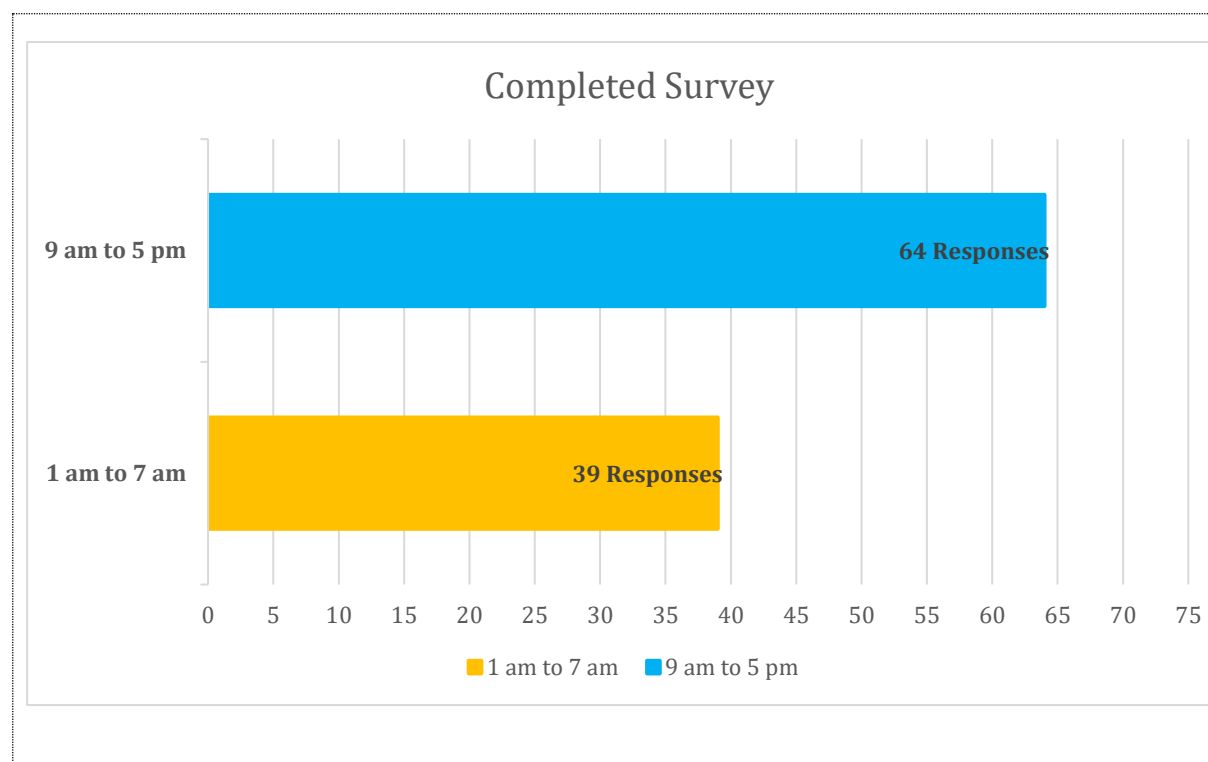
Question 3



This research discussed the changing nature of educators' roles under early childhood education reforms in terms of collaborative practice as well as NQS and workload. Although the time of day that educators responded to the survey was not of initial interest in methodological design, incidentally it became a valid point of discussion. In analysing the initial educator surveys posted on Facebook, it was discovered that the time of day participants responded was unusual. The graph (Figure 21) identified the time of day respondents undertook the Facebook survey. Out of the seventy-five respondents 86 per cent (n=64) completed the survey outside the traditional working hours of 9 am–5 pm. In fact, 53 per cent (n=39) of the sample completed the survey between the hours of 1 am and 7 am. The time of day that

educators accessed Facebook for work-related content cannot necessarily be categorised as active time undertaking work duties and therefore classed as work hours, however it was interesting to note that educators were undertaking surveys related to their daily work at varied hours. Remembering that this survey was posted in a private Facebook group for educators with topics being generally work related, the time of day educators were engaging in this content was significant in itself, as it may provide insight into the working hours of educators more broadly. Within each case study site workload and often working hours were discussed, however as this was not the intent of the original research question, an in-depth investigation was not undertaken. However, through participant observations in each setting and incidental discussion within the case study sites, a discussion of working hours in each case study has been incorporated under Immediacy and access (refer to Chapter four, section 4.4.3).

**Figure 21: Graph depicting time of day of responses**



### **4.2.2 Collaborative practice under the National Quality Standards (NQS)**

The NQS requires that early childhood educators are required to form collaborative partnerships with families under Standard 6. These partnerships are assessed against standards and elements in an assessment and ratings process, with results being published. The NQS standards directly related to this research are:

- Standard 6.1: Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained
- Standard 6.2: Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected

Standard 6.1 is not a new concept for early childhood educators and was certainly a priority for educators before the introduction of the NQS. Early childhood educators have historically engaged with families as part of their daily roles, yet more emphasis appears to be placed on this under the NQS (Rouse, 2012b). Standard 6.2, although not completely new, appears to have differing meanings within the sector (Question 5). The wording of the standard, and way it has been perceived by some in the sector, position educators as the wise providers of knowledge who should share this to the benefit of families, who are regarded as the much-needed recipients of this knowledge (Rouse & Obrien, 2017). A debate regarding educators as the primary holders of knowledge over parents themselves is an interesting argument. Questions regarding educators' perceptions of what collaborative practice means to them, and their role in supporting families under standard 6.2, were further investigated. Interestingly, 85 per cent (n=64) of educators surveyed (strongly agreed or agreed) that they value the role of families in collaborating (Question 10). Whereas only 15 per cent (n=11) of educators indicated that they somewhat agree, disagree or strongly disagree that they value the role of families in collaborating.

### 4.2.3 Definitions of collaborative practice from the sector

Educators' responses to questions regarding the terms collaboration and collaborative practice elicited responses that were similar (Question 5 – What is your interpretation of the term collaborative practice with families?). Not surprisingly, terms used throughout the ECEC policy documents were consistently also used by educators to describe their understanding of collaboration. For example; “collaborative practice equals educators recognising and acknowledging that children's families are the child's first educators; for educators and families to develop trusting, respectful, reciprocal relationships” (Survey Respondent 1). Similarly, “building a reciprocal partnership with families so that we can develop respectful and inclusive practices that enhance the outcomes for children and families at our service” (Survey Respondent 4). Figure 22 is a descriptive statistical word cloud<sup>20</sup> generated by Qualtrics which lists the words educators chose to use when asked about their interpretation of collaborative practice under the NQS. A word cloud represents the highest frequency of words in the largest size, giving greater prominence to words that appeared more often, for example the words ‘Family’, ‘Community’ and ‘Reciprocal’ appeared more prominently in the word cloud as these were the most common responses from survey respondents. Written responses, obtained through open ended questions, regarding collaboration and collaborative practice tended to be framed as positive and discussion of concepts such as relationship building, open communication and knowing families were included in responses. Many educators highlighted the importance of effective communication in providing opportunities for collaboration regarding curriculum with families. Key words and phrases used consistently were: partnerships, reciprocal, respectful, shared vision and goals, open communication, and family

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<sup>20</sup> Word cloud – a tag cloud is a visual representation of text data, typically used to depict keyword metadata on websites, or to visualise free form text.



#### 4.2.4 Current collaborative practices employed

Educators listed a range of practices they employed when collaborating with families (Questions 6, 9, 10 and 11). These can be grouped (Table 12) into traditional practices such as with (hardcopy) newsletters sent home, using parent helpers, and convening working bees, or more recent innovations involving technology such as email and social media applications.

**Table 12: Collaborative practices employed by educators**

| Traditional collaborative practices                                                                                                                                                                                  | Innovations involving technology                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Face-to-face interactions</li><li>• Newsletters</li><li>• Parent helpers</li><li>• Notes home</li><li>• Working bees</li><li>• Special events such as morning teas</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Email</li><li>• Facebook</li><li>• Social media applications: Storypark, Education</li></ul> |

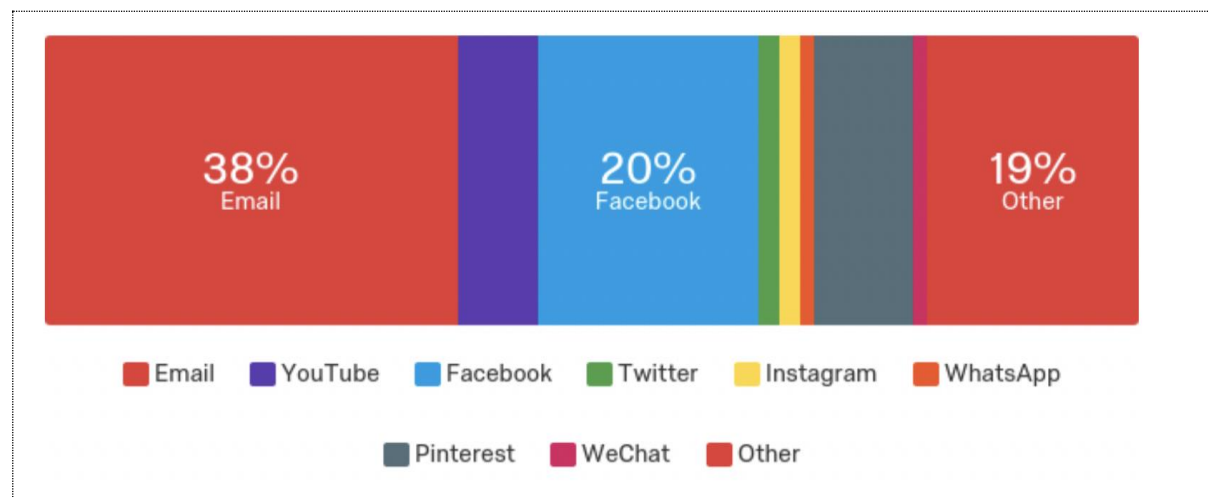
All educators who responded to the survey employed some, or all, of the historic practices listed in Table 12. All were also using traditional practices such as face-to-face interactions, parent helpers and working bees. Traditional practices such as newsletters and notices home were still being used as forms of collaborative practice, however in many instances the mode of disseminating this information had changed, for example: newsletters were emailed home or content posted on social media sites instead of historically being sent home in hardcopy. Delving deeper, within the case studies themselves it was found that educators had adopted these new dissemination practices as they felt that information was more readily available, and was more likely to be read, when sent in an electronic format (this is further discussed within each of the case studies).

The types of technology that educators were engaging with on a daily basis was of interest as it provided an overview of educators' engagement with technology more broadly. Figure 23

shows the types of technology respondents used on a daily basis in their role as an ECEC educator. The results demonstrate that in their daily role educators are engaging with a variety of technology, with email and Facebook being the most popular. Similarly, 82 per cent (n=51) of educators responded that they would be comfortable in using social media to collaborate with families; this may indicate that the majority of educators feel they have the skill and capability to use social media technology.

**Figure 23: Forms of technology used daily by educators in their role**

(Questions 9)



The survey interrogated the various social media platforms that educators were using in addition to traditional practices. Question 10 was concerned with ascertaining educators' current levels of social media use with families, as well as the types/platforms of social media used with families. Out of the seventy-five respondents 60 per cent (n=45) were using email and/or some form of social media such as Facebook, Storypark or Educa to supplement their existing collaborative practice with families. Figure 24 demonstrates that educators are predominantly using email, Facebook and 'other' to communicate with families:

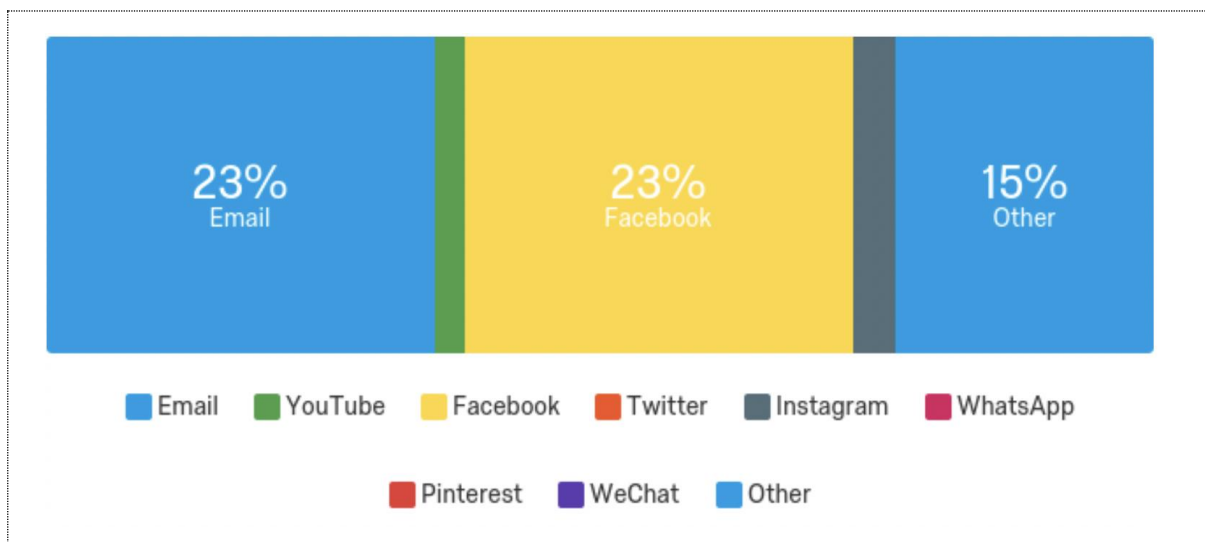
- email 23 per cent (n=17)
- Facebook 23 per cent (n=17)

- Other 15 per cent (n=11)

Of the 15 per cent who selected ‘other’, these were identified in text form as Storypark and Educa. Interestingly, a further twenty-six educators responded positively to seeing the value of using social media to collaborate with families. Of these twenty-six educators who felt that using social media would be valuable, all reported that they felt that families’ lack of time was a barrier to collaborating.

**Figure 24: The different platforms of technology used to collaborate with families**

(Question 10)



#### 4.2.5 Collaboration and curriculum

Principle Two of the Early Years Learning and Development Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) is Partnerships. In meeting Principle Two early years educators must engage with families and build relationships that allow for authentic sharing of information. Principle Two states that “families are respected and actively encouraged to collaborate with educators about curriculum decisions in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful” (p.13). This has placed an expectation on educators for the need to collaborate with families in order to develop co-curricular outcomes

for children. The key elements to Partnerships as reflected in the EYLF (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) are:

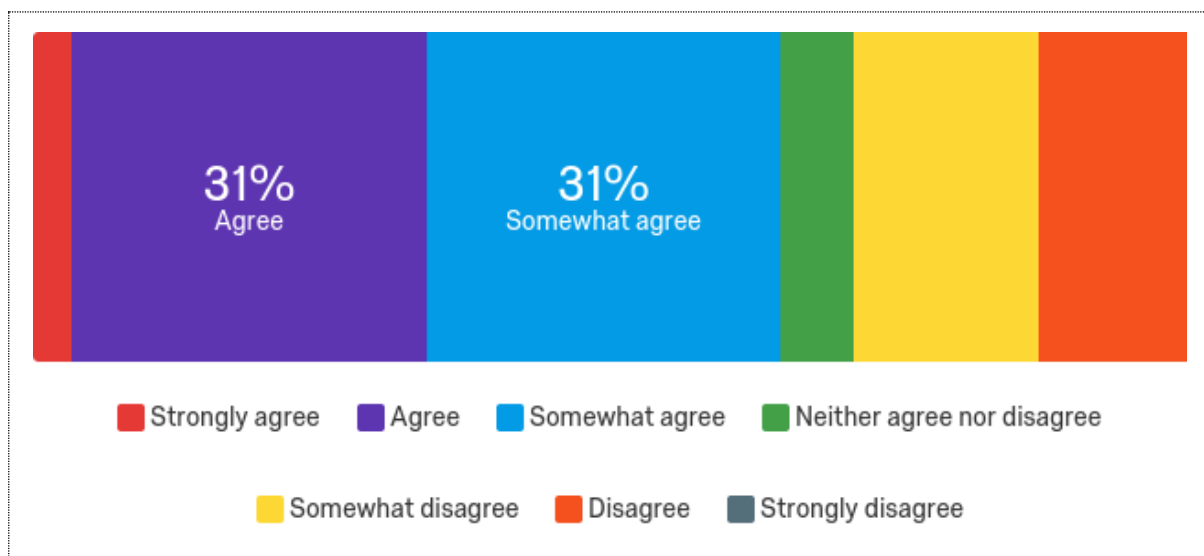
- value each other's knowledge of each child
- value each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life
- trust each other
- communicate freely and respectfully with each other
- share insights and perspectives about each child
- engage in shared decision making

(Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13)

All educators who responded to the survey indicated that they felt that building relationships with parents was important, and vital to their role as an educator. In their responses, many educators used keywords such as 'partnerships', 'reciprocal', and 'shared goals'. Although all educators felt that collaboration was important in terms of communication, the response around collaboration for co-curriculum decision making presented some interesting responses. Some educators mentioned collaborations with families enhancing curriculum. However, the majority discussed collaborations purely in terms of communication and information sharing from educators to families. The majority of educators indicated that collaborating with families was essential in eliciting co-curriculum decision making with families, however attitudes towards achieving shared co-curricular collaboration and the success of this was problematic. Educators consistently remarked that they attempted to engage families in curriculum discussions and invited them to contribute to the curriculum program, yet noted that achieving this was problematic. The reasons articulated by educators related to the fact that they felt the families were not co-contributing were specifically: the families' lack of time, their lack of understanding about the importance of the early childhood years, or when language or other

social barriers inhibited their contribution. For example, some responses included: “Families are too busy” (Survey Respondent 67), “Parents’ lack of knowledge ...” (Survey Respondent 11) and “Their language barrier and thoughts on early childhood education ...” (Survey Respondent 29). Interestingly, though, Question 11 asked educators if they were happy with the current level of collaboration with involvement in their program, to which 53 per cent (n=40) responded strongly agree, agree or somewhat agree (Figure 25). This would indicate that perhaps educators are satisfied with the current ways in which families are collaborating.

**Figure 25: Educators’ overall happiness with levels of family involvement in their program (Question 11)**



There were only two educators who indicated that families’ contribution to the curriculum program was not particularly valuable and therefore they did not attempt to engage families in curriculum decisions at all:

It’s great when parents come into the kindergarten to help, their children love it. They get to be involved in the day and see what their child does. We have great partnerships with our families and communities here, we have parent helpers, working bees, newsletters ... It’s about shared practice and common goals for the children ... Parents bring things for us to use in the program but I do the

programming, I know what is best for the children, what they are interested in, the frameworks, the parents don't know that. (Survey Respondent 53)

The role of families in co-curriculum design was further investigated in the case studies through one-on-one educator interviews, and to examine how the NQS may have changed perception around the level of family involvement. The examination of artefacts was also prevalent in analysing the aspect of families as co-contributions to curriculum design (refer to Chapter 4, section 4.7.1).

#### **4.2.6 The role of the educator and of the family**

Quality Area 6 under the NQS is “Partnerships with families and communities.” Standard 6.1 requires “Respectful and supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained” while Standard 6.2 requires that families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child-rearing are respected. Although these two standards come under the same quality area, they are fundamentally different. Standard 6.1 pertains to the relationships formed between the educator and the family and assumes something of an equal balance in who holds the power or knowledge. Standard 6.2, however, infers that educators are the authority on parenting and can therefore provide support to families, which implies a position of power or authority over families. Educators’ responses to the questions (5, 6 and 7) regarding their role as a support for families was varied.

Standard 6.2 – “Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected” (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 91) – asks educators to provide families with support in parenting while also respecting individual differences. When participants were asked questions regarding this their responses highlighted the educator’s individual opinions and interpretations of what support might look like in relation to this standard. Educators’ responses mentioned support in the forms of

additional information on parenting, interesting articles and newsletters, as well as the provision of professional development and parenting sessions. Some educators noted that, often, the families whom educators felt were most in need were the ones who did not attend such sessions, or read the information that the educators sent home/provided. These assumptions from educators imply a level of judgment about parental behaviour, and could in fact be considered to be detrimental to the formation of equal and authentic collaborative partnerships:

It is difficult because the topics that are really important and the families that you want to come to those often do not attend. So, we have discussed it a lot as I do think it is a big part of our role to share our advice, share our knowledge, and share what we know. But it is hard to do it in a way that is not rushed and that suits families as it's too hard to do at drop off and pick up ... We haven't come to a solution yet. If I find a great article or something I think is important in that aspect I do post a link and share it on our Facebook page, for bedtime reading. If people read it then that's great, if they don't, they don't! Some people often comment that that was really good or interesting or things like that. (Survey Respondent 17)

Many of the responses had either an obvious or underlying assumption that as an educator who had undertaken a university qualification, they were qualified to provide families with expert advice on parenting more broadly. Below are quotes from educators that evidence how Standard 6.2 is being interpreted by some in the field. Does this notion of being an expert and offering families advice on parenting actually assist in the sustainability of collaborative partnerships? Is this what families are wanting from their collaborative partnerships with educators? The tone of some educators' responses does little to reinforce the concept in the Early Years Learning Framework that "families are children's first and most influential teachers" (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13):

... individual meetings with families and we discuss behaviour – what is he doing at home? Do we see the same behaviour here? What are you doing? What should you be doing ... and provide advice on how to overcome these issues. (Survey Respondent 55)

I am happy to provide families with advice; in fact, I see it as part of my role. I mean, I am the one with the university qualification, so I am happy to share with families and help them to get it right. (Survey Respondent 13)

#### **4.2.7 Workload implications**

The survey respondents indicated that educators felt that their workload had qualitatively changed since the introduction of the NQS. The vast majority of those surveyed indicated that their workload had increased and that this increase was compliance related, and not connected to practical teaching tasks.

Research into *‘Early Childhood Teachers’ Work in a Time of Change’* by Grant et al. (2016) discusses the multitude of policy reforms layered with accountability as a new landscape and language for educators in the early years setting. They assert that although policy reforms and compliance-based procedures do legitimise early childhood education as vital, therefore recognising educators’ work in a more professional capacity, the everyday work of teachers has changed (Grant et al., 2016). Similarly, the response from educators in this research affirmed the increase in workload and changing nature of educators’ roles within the sector.

As established, there were two survey questions (3 and 4) which aimed to discover how educators perceived their workload since the introduction of the National Quality Standards in 2011:

Q3. Has your workload increased, decreased or remained the same since the introduction of the NQS?

- Increased
- Decreased
- Remained the same

Q4. In what ways has your workload increased and decreased?

The questions were devised to find out more about educators' perceptions about their workload and their attitudes towards more robust collaborations with families. Seventy-five per cent of respondents indicated that they felt their workload had increased, 24 per cent felt it had stayed the same, and 1 per cent felt workload had decreased since the changes brought about by the introduction of the NQS. The requirement to engage and collaborate with families on a deeper level, one that involved co-contribution to curriculum decisions, was often met with responses of managing the additional workload within current time constraints. The results found that the most commonly cited reasons for the increase in workload was due to compliance and paperwork attributed to the NQS. Common responses included proving compliance by linking standards and outcomes to observations and program planning documents. These were perceived as negative additions to workload that took away from valuable time interacting with children:

It seems like so much compliance now – we don't get time to actually just sit and be with the children. There are so many requirements for observations, portfolios and everything else that I sometimes struggle to just enjoy the children. I also feel like we have more after hours work with QIPs and transition statements – you can't do these things with children present so they become at home tasks. I am often still doing my kindergarten work at 10 pm at night! (Survey Respondent 36)

Administration (type of documentation, increased computer use and associated challenges, department paperwork i.e. 2nd year process, portal login, QIP, self-imposed

expectations i.e. More thoughtful/meaningful/informative newsletters rather than simple lists of 'dates to remember'), parent expectations (time spent face-to-face and on phone engaging with parents who want to exchange info re: their child). (Survey Respondent 48)

Educators' responses indicated that the workload increase was due to compliance around National Quality Standards (NQS), documenting children's learning, making this visible to families and engaging families in this learning. One educator documented an increase in workload due to evidencing NQS and EYLF through the shared social media platform of Storypark: "Paperwork, documentation, reflections, uploading to online portals such as Storypark" (Survey Respondent 23). This point was further investigated in the case studies.

Other educators saw Standard 6.2 as a way of sharing information regarding different approaches to parenting when their opinion was sought, and could see the potential negative issues that advising parents on parenting could raise:

There are a lot of families out there that have a different approach to parenting and would like information on different ways of doing things. They see us doing things here that may be very different from what they do at home and they often see that it works better and are therefore really interested in that. (Survey Respondent 21)

It is a tricky one. Obviously, we support ... it is a fine line. We don't want to set ourselves up as the experts on parenting and every child related issue ... I think we are very good in supporting families when they ask for help and offering help if we feel that there is a need ... but stepping back if their answer is a no. We need to get back into having PD sessions that are open to everyone and giving them options on other directions in they are looking for more help ... it is just a time thing ... never enough

time. For them and us ... but not all families are looking for help and it is not our place to say we know more than they do. (Survey Respondent 36)

#### **4.2.8 Summary of survey data**

The findings have been organised on the basis of the descriptive statistics obtained through the closed questions, and the themes that emerged through the qualitative open ended questions. Subsequently, resulting in a discussion of educators' workloads, collaborate practice and use of social media more broadly. Educators' responses to the initial and secondary survey provided a picture of a landscape for which to further investigate collaborative practice in the three case studies. The majority of educators indicated that:

- They valued collaborative practice with families, yet engaging with them in an authentic manner was sometimes challenging and problematic due to a number of factors such as time and availability
- The majority of educators felt that their workload had increased under the requirements of the NQS, and that this effect was negative in that took them away from their primary role of working with children and put the onus more on administration associated with their work
- The majority of educators indicated that they currently used some form of social media to collaborate with families, with these ranging from email to Facebook or other social media applications

From the twenty-three educators who volunteered for further research, twelve completed the secondary survey. The recruitment from the secondary survey was based on considering the type of social media being used to better enable a wider investigation of collaborative partnerships across the different social media platforms. This is outlined in detail in Chapter 3, section 3.4, regarding the selection of participants. It was on the basis of the initial and

secondary educator surveys that the three cases were developed to further investigate the possibilities of social media use in the third space to collaborate with families. The three case studies were developed around the use of email, Storypark and Facebook for collaborating with families. Email was included as one of the case studies since the initial survey identified that 23% of participants were using email to collaborate, the same percentage that we using Facebook. Furthermore, two volunteers in the secondary survey identified that email had changed the way they collaborated with families.

### **4.3 Case one – collaborative practice through email**

The centre that formed the basis of this case was concerned with the use of email in building collaborative partnerships with families. Thus, email was the focus of the case study, and the case presented an opportunity to explore and understand its use, to see if new possibilities emerged when email is used to collaborate with families. Although not traditionally considered a form of social media, the educators in this setting nominated email as a form of social media since, when discussing practices that were changed by new technologies (such as social media), they felt that email had changed the way in which they worked in their setting. In this way, educators, in this case, perceived email to be a form of social media as it enabled shared electronic communication with parents, and it shared a similar functionality to that of other recognised social media platforms.

The case study aimed to investigate the use of email in the early childhood setting and, more specifically, understand whether new possibilities emerged when used to communicate and collaborate with the families of the children enrolled in the setting.

### **4.3.1 Collaborative practices**

This case was situated in a kindergarten setting in an outer northern suburb of Melbourne, Australia. The setting offers kindergarten programs for children aged three and four years of age and had 125 children enrolled at the time of this research. The kindergarten was solely community-run, not-for-profit (refer to Chapter 2, section 2.2.4) offering kindergarten programs for children aged three to five years. It operates as a double unit, meaning that it offers both three-year-old activity groups as well as the fifteen-hour government-funded four-year-old kindergarten program. The participants in this setting include educators and families connected to the four-year-old kindergarten program.

At the time of this research, two educators in this setting volunteered to take part in the case study. The two educators were Rachel, who held a Bachelor qualification, and Minh, who held a Diploma qualification. Additionally, the Edwards and Sparg families took part in this research.

During the interviews and observations within the setting, it was identified that Rachel and Minh shared a common understanding of collaborative practice with families. The philosophy of collaborative practices in this setting was centred around involving families and the broader community in the work of the particular setting. The following comments from Rachel demonstrated this, "collaborative practice means creating a community, getting everyone involved in the setting and working together" (Rachel, Email, observation one). In clarifying what educators meant by "involved in the setting" (Rachel), it became apparent that this included families' physical presence in the form of interactions at drop off and pick up, involvement in working bees, and being a parent helper featured heavily as well as ... keeping them informed about the way the program was operating and the activities being undertaken by their children. A priority in terms of keeping families informed with communications was

that they be easily accessible in the hope that this removed a barrier for families who were unable to be physically present. Therefore, involvement for the educators meant that they implemented a variety of strategies to engage and communicate with families, including face-to-face interactions, newsletters (electronic) and email. This was evident in the following statement from Rachel:

I try to always include everyone, make everyone feel like they are part of our kindergarten. I do this by inviting parents in, getting them to help out, sending notes home, that kind of thing ... It is easy when I see parents every day, but for those I don't see often I feel that it is harder. I email so that I can reach families who may I may not see that often. (Rachel, email, interview one)

An underlying premise of the Australian governments ECEC reform agenda and the introduction of the EYLF and NQS is based on supporting socially disadvantaged families in a bid that investing in the early years now, reaps economic rewards later in life (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Morel et al., 2012). Subsequently, the National Quality Standard (NQS), Element 6.2, which states that “families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected” (ACECQA, 2012, section 6) underpins this theory. This is relevant in the context of this research as educators’ perceptions of the NQS 6.2 feature within the Storypark and Facebook cases. In relation specifically to this case study, the use of email in collaborating with families, educators' perceptions of NQS 6.2 were centred around providing support where requested and informing families of support services available within the community context. The following comment from Rachel supported this, "I am happy to answer questions or refer families on to existing services that we have locally" (Rachel, Email, observation one).

### 4.3.2 Use of social media in the setting

The educators in this setting volunteered to be part of this research as they felt that the use of email in their setting would be similar to the use of other social media for parental collaborations. For example, Rachel discussed her use of email as a form of social media by explaining, "email helps keep everyone connected. It is everywhere now. Everyone uses it as part of their job. It allows us to share information, photos of children, and even video" (Rachel, email, observation one). Through the interviews and observations, the educators noted that they had felt that the use of email had changed the nature of collaborations in their setting. Families in this setting had agreed to share email addresses with the educators. However, email addresses were not publicly shared and the use of blind carbon copying (bcc)<sup>21</sup> was used in all email communications. In addition to face-to-face interactions with families on arrival and collection of their children, the primary means of communication with parents in the setting was via the use of email. Families received weekly emails from Rachel containing information on curriculum and photos of the children undertaking various experiences. The email list was constructed with the blind copy feature (bcc), which meant that each family received the same email and photos, but that they could not see the email addresses of other families on the email list. Rachel implemented the use of bcc as a result of one family's concern over privacy. Rachel commented that email communication was sent from herself (the educator) to all families, however, families responded only to the educator and not to the whole group, responses were limited and tended to be one-sided from Rachel to families. Therefore, although Rachel and Minh identified email as a form of social media that assisted in collaborative partnerships with

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<sup>21</sup> When you place email addresses in the bcc field of a message, those addresses are invisible to the recipients of the email – <https://www.technology.pitt.edu/help-desk/how-to-documents/using-blind-carbon-copy->

families, the nature of the one-sided communication tends to indicate that communications were not collaborative in nature.

Rachel and Minh indicated that the use of email to collaborate with families had replaced the existing practice of sharing daily reflections via hardcopy newsletters and the reflection book displayed at the entrance of the kindergarten. The following comments from Rachel supported this, "I don't bother with hardcopy newsletters anymore, I just send the weekly email" (Rachel, Email, observation one). Similarly, Minh indicated that "all information is sent out using email now" (Minh, email, observation two). Through observations in the setting, it was established that Rachel used email as a form of sharing weekly reflections with families that had replaced the use of handwritten reflections that were displayed for families. Rachel believed that using email to disseminate her reflections was superior to that of handwritten displays as it allowed families not physically present in the kindergarten to engage and keep informed. She noted:

I used to spend hours every day writing up my reflections, and nobody really ever read them. I use email now, and it is more efficient. I am probably more focused on what I write and share. If something great happened today, then I can share it immediately. Like last week, we had a flock of king parrots land in the yard. I was able to take photos and send out my reflection immediately. If I had been handwriting that I may never have found the time. (Rachel, Email, observation one)

Rachel identified that although email had replaced the existing practice of handwritten reflections and notices to families, the way in which she completed her curriculum program planning had remained the same. As mandated by the Australian National Quality Standards (NQS), educators are required to plan for and document the curriculum cycle and educational outcomes for children. Quality Area One, Educational Program and Practice, requires educators to evidence their curriculum planning, which is subsequently assessed through the

Assessment and Rating process (refer to Chapter 2, section 2.2.5 for additional information on the Assessment and Rating process). Curriculum planning is sometimes also referred to as pedagogical documentation in academic sources (refer to Chapter 2, section 2.2.1). Rachel commented that her use of email had not impacted her program planning which took place using a Microsoft Word<sup>22</sup> document, which was then displayed at the entrance of the kindergarten, allowing families visibility of the program planning. This was confirmed by researcher observations in the setting and the following statement from Rachel:

I still use word [Microsoft Word] for my program. It is easy and quick. I have it set up so that I can show the indoor/outdoor program. I often add to it or change it so it may not be exactly as predicted. Things change, and I like to be able to just run with it. I haven't really considered how I would use email for programming. I don't think that it would really work. (Rachel, Email, observation two)

The data highlights the ways in which educators used email, and their perspectives are further explored in the sections below. Similar themes emerged from interviews and observations in all settings across the three case studies. The following themes have been used to discuss the findings:

- Immediacy and access
- Content characteristics of collaborations
- Inbound and outbound communication
- Privacy and ownership

These significant themes will next be explored.

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<sup>22</sup> Microsoft Word is a word processor developed by Microsoft – <https://products.office.com/en-au/word>

### 4.3.3 Immediacy and access

Immediacy and access of the various social media, including email, was cited by educators as the main reason for its use with families. In this case, the use of the term ‘immediacy’ was primarily driven by the educators' reference to how quickly they were able to disseminate information to families. However, terms such as convenience and asynchronous could also be equally relevant as further investigation, and discussion with educators, found that the immediacy educators felt was provided was generally one-sided. For example, emails were sent to the whole group using the bcc function, and this was perceived as immediate as all families received the same information and at the same time. The term immediacy appeared to refer to educators’ experiences of ease of accessibility rather than real-time, fast and reciprocal communications with families. Rachel and Minh confirmed that email communication tended to be one-way with educators taking the lead on communications. The following comment from Rachel supported this, "I send out weekly newsletters and updates. I might get some responses, but not many. Families only respond to me, not the group as a whole as other recipients are not visible" (Rachel, email, interview one).

Rachel and Minh indicated that the traditional face-to-face interactions that occurred at arrival and departure times excluded many working families and were not an efficient use of educator time. The use of email was seen to enable families to be engaged with the ECEC educators regardless of whether they could be present in the kindergarten. The educators identified that using email removed a barrier to their interactions and hence improved the quality of the collaborations. Educators indicated that using email also allowed for families to access information at a time that was suitable for them. It enabled families to be involved and contribute to the curriculum in a non-threatening way. The term non-threatening was further discussed during researcher observations in the setting, revealing that Rachel considered email

to be a less intimidating way for families to engage and present ideas that could be considered as curriculum co-contribution. The following comments from Rachel explained this:

I think that some families are too intimidated to actually contribute to the curriculum in a meaningful way. It would be difficult approaching the teacher if you have no knowledge of the frameworks [Early Years Learning Frameworks EYLF]. Email makes it easier. A parent doesn't even have to speak directly to you; they can just email about a child's interests and voila ... you have a contribution! (Rachel, email, interview one)

Additionally, the immediacy of email was highlighted as being very beneficial to collaborations at the kindergarten, as evidenced by Rachel in the comments below:

This week we have had an interest in making perfumes and potions, and I can put out immediately to those families and say look this is what is going on, the children are really interested – could you bring in some flowers on your way to kindergarten or some herbs from the garden. They do! It's an immediate connection between what the children are interested in and doing, the program and the families. You can't get that any other way. You can't plan that a month in advance and send out a written note. It's got to be more immediate, and that's what this social media offers you, it's that more immediate reaction to what you are doing and faster to get that going. (Rachel, email, interview one)

Interestingly, Rachel used the term 'immediate' several times when discussing her use of email to collaborate with families. Often though, the term immediate is referring to fast dissemination of information to families and is not inclusive of reciprocal responses. In other words, sending an email to families may be a fast way of informing families. However, if families do not promptly respond to the email, or at all, is this truly an immediate collaborative process? Furthermore, with educators identifying email as being particularly one-sided, which was

useful in the dissemination of information, it does raise the question of communication or collaboration and whether information sharing via email is actually collaborative at all?

Rachel and Minh cited access to technology via mobile phones and tablets as being a more reliable and achievable means of communicating with families in preference to the traditional methods of sending notes home. Educators felt that the use of email was a more effective means of communication than traditional paper-based means, as it allowed focused and targeted interactions. Rachel commented that the pressure to fill a newsletter or write a one-page note home was superseded by the ability to send out a three-line email with targeted information. In turn, Rachel and Minh commented that the efficiency of email improved operations. Therefore, with regard to educator workload, Rachel and Minh indicated that they felt that the use of email had not increased their workload. In fact, Rachel said that it had likely decreased her workload as she no longer had to write daily program reflections, long weekly newsletters, or repeatedly contact individual parents on various matters. Generally, emails were sent weekly, and there were little or no additional email responses generated as a result. Rachel also believed that a short email was more likely to be read by the parents, rather than a paper-based one-page newsletter. Overall, educators in this setting believed that email ease and access to spontaneous communication and collaboration with families improved the quality of collaborations with families and reduced their workload:

I think it's reaching out to more families quicker. I think if I had to tell all those ten families that information they either would not get it or it would take ages. Saying bring this back or guess what we saw this thing – ten times over. So that saves time. If you have taken a photo already, then that is quite quick, and it takes a minute to write a blurb, so it is all really quick, and you've already got the photo anyway. (Minh, email, observation one)

Similarly, from Rachel:

I don't think it has increased my workload as I think that the information is getting absorbed more than if I did it in an old-fashioned paper form. Families are more in tune to what is going on as they have actually read the communication, more than if I had to explain it to all parents or send home a note, and then re-send notes to those who had lost it and things like that. Social media – most people are on it, so I capture all kinds of families in one go and get more of a response from more people reading my information. No, I don't think it has increased my workload. And I think that the biggest difference is that because it is social media and because it is very quick and direct, and very friendly and that's my style. To be able to say – just a couple of things, this week blah, blah blah, and remember that ... see you on Thursday. Whereas if I was trying to translate that into a newsletter, it becomes more formal, or I send out an A3 page with three sentences on it and feel the need to fill it up so it becomes long and it's more work. I don't want that expectation of a weekly written newsletter or daily reflection. (Rachel, email, interview one)

Although Rachel indicated that her workload was reduced by the use of email, upon further questioning during researcher observations, Rachel indicated that the reduction was concerning collaborating with families and not overall workload. Rachel explained that email made collaborating with families faster and therefore reduced her workload in collaborating. However, her overall workload had increased due to the onerous needs of compliance regulations. This was evidenced in the following comments from Rachel:

Email has made collaborating more streamlined, faster, and easier. Everyone gets the same message at the same time. It is also faster to type than write. But if you mean

workload overall and not just the way I collaborate with families, then I would have to say my workload has increased. When I came back from maternity leave, I couldn't believe the changes. I mean, that was a few years ago, but I came back to the frameworks, the standards and the ratings. It took me a while to get my head around it all. My workload has definitely increased since then. I mean, the core business of working with children is the same, but it is all the other stuff, the paperwork, and making sure I cover everything that has taken longer and made my job harder. (Rachel, email, observation two)

Overall impacts on workload have been discussed above. However, with regard to traditional working hours, Rachel and Minh indicated that in using email, interactions with families were now more targeted and flexible in times of day the communication took place. Rachel commented that emails were generally sent during working hours; however, they noted that families would sometimes email outside traditional working hours. Rachel explained that she had removed email notifications from her mobile phone to ensure that she was not aware of, and responding to, families outside working hours and hence ensuring a normal work-life balance. This was explained in the following comments from Rachel:

I actually removed the email notification from my phone last year. I found that I would get email notifications at 9 pm and I couldn't help myself, I would check, and then if I didn't respond, I would feel guilty. It got really silly, and my husband just said to me, stop doing work at night ... I hadn't actually considered it work, but of course, it is. Anyway, I have removed the notifications now, and I generally check emails before I leave for the day and then again first thing in the morning, and do you know what, nobody has died! It's okay if someone has to wait a few hours for a response. It means that I now have my nights back to myself. (Rachel, email, interview one)

As indicated by Rachel, the use of email has decreased her workload in terms of interacting with families. However, email did increase the potentiality of after-hours communications. Subsequently, Rachel implemented the practice of purposefully not responding to emails at night, rather within working hours.

#### **4.3.4 Content characteristics of collaborations**

In undertaking the thematic analysis of communication and examining the content of emails sent to families, the majority of information transmitted tended to be focused around what the children had been doing that week at kindergarten retrospectively. It included basic level curriculum information, such as informing what the children were currently interested in and suggesting possible extension ideas. Rachel indicated that emails always included images of children as she felt that this would engage families more effectively. Figure 26 is a screenshot of an email sent to families; photos of children have been removed, and pseudonyms used.

***Figure 26: Email to families from case study one***

Hello families,

We had another great week last week doing lots of interesting things. We had a lot of interest in experiments, mostly concocted and run by small groups of children. They have been experimenting with bi-carb of soda and vinegar making volcanos and sizzling art works. A couple of the children discovered that the environmentally friendly packing foam dissolves into a kind of gloop in water and this provided lots of interesting exploring and experimenting. Kareen and I got in on the fun organising a couple of experiments; one with Mentos and cola (we brought out the hard suits for that one!) and the children did one exploring colour by putting Skittles in water to watch the colours bleed but not mix. They had lots of fun sharing their results with each other and then eating the soggy skittles!

If anyone has some other ideas for experiments and would like to come in, please let me know?

The Museum visit was really interesting and the children engaged in the different artefacts and activities that Wendy brought in. Wendy was really blown away by the knowledge and engagement of the children and she loved hearing the children's stories of their encounters with different sea creatures.

See you all on Thursday

Funny things kids say has to go to Emerald this week, she nailed it: 'A teenager is still a kid, but they have a phone!'

Some photos from the week attached.

Throughout the interviews with the educators and the researcher's observations in the setting, Rachel shared that her intent in the collaborations with families was to allow families to be present in their child's day at kindergarten. When asked about what Rachel choose to share via email, the answer focused on connecting families to the kindergarten and allowing families to engage in conversations with children about time spent at kindergarten. The following statement from Rachel supported this:

Often it is from those families that can't be here. It's from the partners that don't do the drop offs and pick ups so that they feel included in that program. It gives them a spark of something to talk about around the dinner table so that they know what's going on as they received information about what's happening at kindergarten or saw a photo. Kids don't always remember what they did or to share it, so parents can see what they did and discuss it. Last week we did bobbing apples, and parents could then follow that up at home if they wanted to. If a person hasn't been here or hasn't done kinder drop off or pick up, they can still be included in the conversation and what is going on. That's really rewarding and is worth it for the extra work that it takes. (Rachel, email, observation one)

Throughout researcher observations in the setting, the ways in which Rachel and Minh determined the content of emails, and what to email to families, was discussed. Rachel indicated that the primary intent for using email with families was for communication purposes and not specifically for curriculum collaboration. However, Rachel also commented that using email did assist in inviting curriculum collaboration with parents, as families could efficiently respond and contribute if they chose to do so. Rachel mentioned that curriculum collaborations, as required in evidence for the National Quality Standards, may be useful and offer some potential. However, her primary intent was centred on efficiently engaging with families, not evidencing compliance. This was supported by Rachel's comment:

I know some people do all their programming and everything on social media, I'm not sure if email would really help with that. I know some kinders use Storypark or Educa. I don't know exactly how they work, so wouldn't be game moving to that. I'm not sure how email would stack up in a rating visit, they [the emails] are all separate, and it would be a lot of work to pull it all together to show how I am meeting everyone's needs, but I suppose it could be done. (Rachel, email, observation two)

#### **4.3.5 Inbound and outbound communication**

In observing the nature of the collaborations via email, the majority of communication was outbound to the families from the educator. That is, families were sent emails containing information to be read that did not require a direct reply or response unless they chose to do so. As previously discussed, email communications were between the educator and the individual family, and not between families. The emails tended to be focused on informing families of basic curriculum experiences, in a language that families could understand. Emails were structured to enable conversations to occur between a family and their child. At times the emails did contain information or reminders about upcoming events or actions – notes or money due back. However, no direct reply to email was required. Below is an excerpt of an email sent out to all families by Rachel:

Hello families

It has been another busy but great week! The weather has really started to get cold, and winter is quickly approaching. Thanks to everyone who has packed spared clothes, can everyone also remember gum boots for outside and messy play ... Next week is Wild Action week, so please ensure that all monies are paid by Monday.

Have a great weekend ...

(Rachel, email, observation two)

According to Rachel and Minh, generally, the types of replies that families did respond with were – comments that they liked the photos of their children or basic level responses such as the activity looks good. Co-contribution to the curriculum was promoted in the emails, for example, when Rachel asked families, "if anyone has some other ideas for experiments and would like to come in, please let me know" (Rachel, email communication to families). However, Rachel commented that she had not yet seen that the use of email had increased any generation of co-curriculum contribution and, generally, co-contribution was low in the setting. Educators attributed the low levels of co-contribution to the curriculum as being "a sign of the times" (Rachel, email, interview one) with families being too busy, or not particularly interested in engaging in this way. The following statement from Rachel supported this, "we don't get much contribution. I think our families are just too busy. Most work. I also think most are just happy; they don't really care as much about the curriculum" (Rachel, email, interview one).

#### **4.3.6 Privacy and ownership**

All families at the setting were asked to sign a permission to take and use photographs release form which allowed educators to include images of children in their emails and other forms of communication and displays within the kindergarten. During observations at the setting, Rachel confirmed that the families within the setting indicated that they had no concerns about signing the release forms and that all families had provided signed consent.

As previously stated, emails are only sent to current families; email addresses are private and cannot be viewed by everyone. The blind carbon copy (bcc) had only been recently introduced after a parent expressed concern regarding their email address being circulated within the email list. The parent felt that circulating all families' email addresses within the weekly emails was a breach of privacy, and raised potential security concerns. From interactions with both Rachel

and Minh, they believed that the family's concerns were not with sharing information or images of children, but about the privacy of their email addresses more broadly, and that families perceived email addresses as private information. For example, Minh commented that “we use the bcc so that families cannot see each other’s email addresses” (Minh, email, observation one). Rachel and Minh responded to this and have now included the bcc as standard practice when communicating with families.

#### **4.3.7 The possibilities of Third Space and quality within the case**

The Third Space (Bhabha, 1994; Moje et al., 2004) as the theoretical framework was used in this study (refer to Chapter 3, section 3.3), as it allowed for new possibilities to be explored in considering the use of social media combined with collaborative practices with parents. The choice was driven by the fact that third space is inclusionary, not exclusionary, and also that this research was not looking to define outcomes and reveal them to participants. Simply put, this research was not intending to propose that the use of social media to collaborate with parents was superior to existing practices. The intent was to examine the ways in which educators were using social media to collaborate and to determine if new possibilities emerged in the third space. The research was focused on exploring the possibilities and creating new understandings about emerging practices that had the potential to exist in the third space.

In defining new possibilities, the focus was centred on whether social media changed the nature of collaborations with families. Essentially – did using social media alter the type of interactions or the frequency of interactions between educators and families? Why might this have occurred and, consequently, what are the implications of any changes?

In the case of using email to collaborate with families, there was little evidence to suggest that new possibilities emerged as a result of its use. However, some traditional practices were replaced by different practices that emerged in the third space, such as emails replacing

newsletters. In this case, the educators themselves typically felt that email was a more effective practice than newsletters and therefore superseded their existence. In this case, educators sought to gain curriculum input from families by discussing future curriculum investigations via email, yet this strategy did not appear to be particularly effective. A larger question (although outside the bounds of this research) could be posed here; do families actually want to contribute to curriculum decisions?

The nature of the collaborations between educators and families tended to be more about sharing of information with families, which is a historic practice that educators have always done, and which fits within the first space. The mode of how information was shared, email rather than a newsletter, increased the number of families interacting on a communication level, but not the type of collaboration; information sharing and communication rather than collaboration and co-contribution. Rachel and Minh did attribute the use of email to an increase in efficiency when sharing information. Therefore, the use of email could be seen as a new modality of disseminating information, hence offering potential in the third space. However, a change in the dissemination method of the same information is questionable when considered a new possibility.

The desire to be more inclusive of working families and to encourage quality collaborations was the driver for the change in practice in this case. Some guiding principles appeared to be effective in the way that email was used with families, such as bcc and only sending emails weekly so as not to burden families with additional unwanted communications. Remembering that emails were generally sent weekly, one email that replaces several intermittent communications could be thought of as offering increased efficiency for both educators and families alike. The potentiality of email reaching families who were not previously engaged did offer possibilities in the third space and was a practice that was found to be beneficial in this setting.

Did the use of email bring new possibilities? It could be argued that they are not new possibilities, simply the same historic practices using a twenty-first century mode of delivery. The sharing of information is the sharing of information. It is only the mode of delivery from paper form to email that has changed in this instance. However, the implication of this change from paper-based to electronic has allowed for a wider audience and increased efficiency, which was perceived as being immediate in nature. A change in modality of information allowed for working families who may not have previously accessed traditional communications to now be part of a wider collaborative practice. The benefits that email offered in the third space appear to be centred around increasing access to communications and improving the overall efficiency of communications. Although not collaborative in nature, the above are benefits that are afforded in the third space of using email with families.

#### **4.3.8 Case one through a quality lens**

In terms of looking at case one through a quality lens, the question comes back to whose quality? Is email enabling quality collaborations if examined from the role of the educator? From the role of the family? Similarly, from the role of the regulator, in this case through the Australian Government through the Assessment and Rating process. Educators, within the case, felt that the use of email had enhanced collaborative partnerships since their information now reached more families than it had previously with historical practices. However, as the emails tended to be one-sided and focused on reminding families of upcoming events, was the use of email in this circumstance inviting of authentic collaboration? Although email had not increased the curriculum co-contribution from families, educators felt that providing families with the opportunity to do so meant that they had met that area of Standard 6 under the National Quality Standard (NQS). However, if the emails intended to meet Standard 6 of the NQS, which is focused on collaboration, does email communication that is not collaborative in nature comply and satisfy these requirements?

Educators identified that email had enhanced the collaborative partnerships in their setting as it had enabled fast communication to more families. It could, therefore, be inferred that these educators believed improved opportunities for different dimensions of quality were being met. For example, Minh commented that “families are now more informed and return things on time” (Minh, email, observation one) and similarly from Rachel, “we are providing high-quality collaborations, families have a range of ways of engaging and email seems to be really convenient” (Rachel, email, observation one).

Data from family surveys and interactions during researcher observations indicated that families in case one were reported as being satisfied with the overall level of communication about their children’s learning. For example, “I think that the level of communication is good. We get emails every week, and I feel like I can ask questions” (Sparg family, email, observation two). Although families did not comment on wanting to be involved more in curriculum decisions, they also did not express that the emails overwhelmed them, or forced them to be involved in unwanted ways. The use of email, in this case, appeared to be meeting the needs of both educators and families alike in terms of disseminating information, yet the collaborative nature of the communications is questionable (family perspectives are further discussed in Chapter four, section 4.6).

#### **4.3.9 Summary of Case One – collaborative practice through email**

The use of email in the third space appears to assist in the inclusivity of working families and efficient dissemination of information. Nevertheless, it did not appear to provide new possibilities in terms of authentic collaboration that is reciprocal in nature. The nature of the collaborations remained the same between educators and families. It was simply the efficiency of disseminating and the modality that changed. The educators’ intent in this setting was centred around including families in the day-to-day happenings of the kindergarten and

allowing for conversations to be had between families and children. Although co-curriculum decision making was somewhat a focus, email did not seem to elicit any greater response in generating co-curricular outcomes than that of historical practice. The overall intent of the educators with regard to collaborative partnerships in this setting was met using email. Similarly, the needs of families in this setting appeared to be met through the use of email for communication purposes.

#### **4.4 Case two – collaborative practice through Storypark**

This case study focuses on the use of Storypark in building collaborative partnerships between educators and families. As discussed in Chapter two, section 2.5.1, Storypark is a software application that provides an online platform that can be accessed via an iOS or Android. This app allows educators to document and record children's learning and share this information with nominated accounts, such as with parents and carers (Storypark, 2018). This case was situated in a long day care setting that utilised Storypark to collaborate with families (refer to Chapter three, section 3.8.1 for participant details). The case study aimed to investigate the use of Storypark in the early childhood setting and, more specifically, understand whether new possibilities emerged when used to communicate and collaborate with the families of the children enrolled in the centre.

##### **4.4.1 Collaborative practices**

This case was situated in a long day care centre in inner-city Melbourne, Australia. The centre offers education and care for children aged from six weeks to the beginning of primary school, generally around five to six years of age. At the time of the research, there were four educators in this setting, who volunteered to take part in this case study. They were two Bachelor qualified educators, Pareeya and Anne Marie and two educators, Georgia, who held a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care (Dip ECEC) and Fatima, who held a Certificate in Children's

Services (Cert III ECEC). The educators' qualifications are relevant in the context of this particular case as it became apparent that there were distinct differences in the ways in which the educators used Storypark, and that these appeared to be related to the qualifications of the educators. The use of Storypark and its connection to the educators' qualifications are further discussed in Chapter four, section 4.4. Additionally, the families who took part in this research were the Nguyen, Hernandez, Virgato and Williams families.

During interviews and observations within the setting, it was noted that the educators shared a common understanding of collaborative practice with families. These included recognising the importance of building relationships based on each family's needs and acknowledging that families and children can contribute positively to children's learning and the setting. Anne Marie illustrated this in a one-on-one interview when she described collaborative practice as "acknowledging and valuing each and every family, making sure you meet the needs of each child and family and involving them in our centre" (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one). Similarly, Georgia described collaborative practice as "being available and talking with families, getting to know them and how their family works" (Georgia, Storypark, observation one).

When asked about the collaborative practices employed in the setting, educators mentioned that they deployed a range of strategies, including face-to-face interactions and asking parents to act as helpers, as well as the notifications and observations that they sent using Storypark. The educators stated that they placed a premium on face-to-face interactions and believed that these could not be replaced with electronic communication. However, they also indicated that Storypark was excellent in facilitating and enhancing collaborative practices in an online space. For example, Pareeya indicated that:

Storypark helps us connect with families who don't get a chance to come in and do drop off. Those who work and just don't have time can still find out what is going on. Before Storypark, we only used to put information and notices next to the sign-in book or send things home, which meant that families who weren't actually doing drop off often missed out. (Pareeya, Storypark, interview one)

Throughout the interviews and researcher observations in the settings, educators were asked about their perceptions of the role of educator as one that offers support to families. Conversations were based on educators' understandings of the National Quality Standard (NQS) Element 6.2, which states that "families are supported in their parenting role, and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected" (ACECQA, 2012, section 6). This was relevant in the context of this research as the underlying premise of the Australian Government's ECEC reform agenda, and hence the establishment of the NQS and EYLF was that investing in the early years as a form of social investment would reap reward in terms of future productivity (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Morel et al., 2012).

Educators within the setting shared similar understandings and views of their role in terms of supporting families in their parenting role. All educators felt that providing information and resources was important and that if requested or when required, they would provide support. In examining this further, Anne Marie commented that "I think it is important to include information about parenting support and services available in our community, but I don't tell parents what they should do. I provide information if they ask" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation one). Likewise, Pareeya indicated that "support is part of my role, but only to a degree. My main role is education for children" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation one).

As established, an underlying premise of the Australian Government's ECEC reforms was based on economic investment for future return, whereby supporting socially disadvantaged

families would reap benefits (refer to Chapter one, section 1.3.3). In this way, delivering high-quality early childhood education now would assist those in social disadvantage later in life. This is relevant in this Storypark case as although educators using Storypark indicated that they did so in a bid to engage families and sustain a sense of community, this was not necessarily the outcome. Such as in the case of one family who engaged in conversation during the researcher observations, providing valuable insight into the use of Storypark in engaging and supporting families. The Hernandez family had recently arrived in Australia and were considered a refugee family. The Hernandez family commented that their inability to understand and manipulate the Storypark app excluded them from engaging with both educators and other families in the setting. This was evidenced in the following statement, "I not know how to use ... It on my phone, but ... kids help me. I not use. I not use. I talk people" (Hernandez family, Storypark, observation three). This example from the Hernandez family demonstrates the importance of understanding the diverse needs of families, and what they require from the collaborative partnership more broadly. In terms of the underlying premise NQS 6.2, it would appear in this case that Storypark does not afford possibilities for supporting families.

The ways in which educators used Storypark within this setting will be further explored in the sections below.

#### **4.4.2 Use of social media in the setting**

The use of Storypark in this setting was instigated by the Cluster Manager, who was responsible for the overall operational requirements of the long day care centre. As previously discussed in Chapter three, Cluster Managers oversaw the management and day-to-day operations of the early childhood setting. The Cluster Manager notified all staff that they should use Storypark to communicate with parents. According to Pareeya, communication from the Cluster Manager

stated that the rationale for the use of Storypark in this setting was based around "being able to document children's learning effectively, making it visible to families, and for building collaborative partnerships with each family" (Pareeya, Storypark, interview one).

Through interviews and informal discussions, the educators revealed that they believed that Storypark had all but replaced traditional methods of pedagogical documentation, which was previously centred on curriculum planning documents, developing newsletters, and learning stories to share with parents. Both Pareeya and Anne Marie commented that they now used only Storypark to disseminate centre information and no longer used any paper-based methods. Similarly, both used Storypark to plan, document and record individual and group observations of children. Pareeya and Anne Marie then posted these to individual families or printed them for families who had opted out of using Storypark. Throughout researcher observations in the setting, both Pareeya and Anne Marie used Storypark for curriculum planning and observations (Researcher observations one, two and three).

In conducting these observations and in discussion with the educators, it was noted that a significant focus of the collaboration with families was centred around demonstrating the stated outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and making this visible and explicit to the families. This was revealed by Anne Marie when she said:

Using Storypark makes it easy for me to link the outcomes (EYLF learning outcomes) to what the children are doing on a daily basis. I mean, I know how it connects, but it makes it clearer, and we can show that to parents or the department (Department of Education). (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation one)

Anne Marie also indicated that by including connections to the learning outcomes, the centre would be better placed in meeting the National Quality Standards (NQS) within the National Quality Framework (NQF). The data highlighting the ways in which educators used Storypark

and their perspectives are further explored in the sections below. The themes that emerged from the interviews and observations in all settings were:

- Immediacy and access
- Content characteristics of collaborations
- Inbound and outbound communication
- Privacy and ownership

These significant themes will next be explored.

#### **4.4.3 Immediacy and access**

Through interviews and informal discussion, the educators revealed that they believed the main advantages of Storypark were: ease of use, the immediacy of communication, and access to and for families. In this Storypark centre, the use of the term ‘immediacy’ was primarily driven by the educators' reference to how quickly they were able to disseminate information and respond to families. However, terms such as ‘convenience’ and ‘asynchronous’ could also be equally relevant as further investigation and discussion with educators found that the immediacy educators felt was provided was often one-sided. For example, educators could send out communication at any time; this was thought of as immediate, although response times from parents and families could often be hours or days. The term immediacy appeared to refer to educators' experiences of ease of accessibility rather than real-time fast communications with families. This was supported by Pareeya who remarked that:

Storypark allows me to let families know immediately what is required for our science night next week instead of being asked by every parent or putting it on the notice board. I won't actually get responses, but hopefully, it means people turn up with the right stuff. (Pareeya, Storypark, interview two)

Similarly, Georgia discussed Storypark as being immediate, "it allows us to send things to families immediately, and they can respond immediately, that's why it's so useful" (Georgia, Storypark, observation one). Therefore, as educators themselves used the term immediacy when discussing collaborative practice, it has been applied in this research.

The educators believed that their clientele, who were typically professional working families, benefited from being able to access information and collaborate at times that were convenient for them. Educators reported that Storypark had simplified their responsibilities in terms of documentation and had significantly increased the levels of collaboration between the setting and families. For example, educators now used Storypark to monitor and record individual children's documentation, removing the need for keeping checklists and other paper-based formats, which in turn was easier for families. Anne Marie, Pareeya and Georgia all indicated that using Storypark to record and disseminate information was a change from previous practice and felt that it simplified processes, resulting in more simplified communication with families. Educators commented that Storypark now allowed documentation to be easily shared with families, which was perceived as increasing the levels of collaboration. Anne Marie discussed an example of this:

... we used to keep individual observations of children, print them out, then paste them into the child's portfolio but families would never look at them, this way I can just send it using Storypark and the family has it straight away, it was such a lot of work, and nobody even used to look at them! (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one)

A large number of families at the setting had two working parents, and educators indicated that Storypark allowed families to access not only content about their child at a time that was convenient, but also access the educators, and that this flexibility had increased centre/home collaboration significantly. This was evidenced when Anne Marie noted:

Storypark, for collaboration, you can't get better. Families can be eating a piece of toast in the morning and can see a learning story from yesterday that I did, and can then share that with a grandparent overseas. They can share what they did on the weekend, and then I can incorporate that into my programming ... The increased partnerships with families is tenfold. (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one)

During interviews and observations in the setting, the issue of workload was discussed. Anne Marie and Pareeya indicated that Storypark had not significantly increased their workload. However, it had changed the nature of the way they worked and had shifted their historical practices. Georgia and Fatima felt that their workload was unaffected by Storypark. However, they did indicate that they now spent more time taking and uploading photos. Anne Marie and Pareeya indicated that Storypark had changed the way they collaborated with families and that Storypark had replaced some existing practices. This was evident in the use of Storypark replacing checklists and paper-based observations and documentations. Anne Marie commented that “I don’t need to use a checklist of children’s names anymore for keeping track of who needs an observation” (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two). Similarly, Pareeya indicated that “I pretty much just send messages home to parents using Storypark, I rarely do notices home anymore” (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two). From observations in the setting and discussion with educators, as just described, it was evident that Storypark had changed the ways in which these two teachers worked.

In relation to workload and work practices, the educators indicated that the use of Storypark affected traditional hours of work and work location. Anne Marie and Pareeya advised that they now often worked after hours accessing Storypark and responding to parents at night, on weekends, and on school holidays. Georgia and Fatima (Diploma and Certificate trained), did not indicate that their workload had increased and commented that they “did not get paid enough to work after hours” (Georgia, Storypark, observation two). This could be attributed to

the fact that Bachelor trained educators are paid at a higher rate than Diploma and Certificate trained educators. Pareeya and Anne Marie did not perceive these after-hours practices as being a negative change, but as being a necessary practice if authentic collaboration was to take place. Both Pareeya and Anne Marie commented that they often worked from home, and the functionality of Storypark enabled this, for example, Anne Marie commented that "I work at home most nights, it is just part of the job. I like that I can select where I work from in my non-contact time. I can even do it from a café on the weekend!" (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one). Similarly, Pareeya indicated that "I just don't get time to do it all during the day, so I usually just take it home and then I can work on newsletters, transition statements and all the other stuff when the kids go to bed" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation one).

Furthermore, Anne Marie and Pareeya revealed that the functionality of Storypark had simplified many of their documentation practices, and they felt that the traditional work location could now be flexible. They were pleased that they could now have the freedom to work from home and be able to access records and collaborate at a time and in a space convenient for them. Anne Marie and Pareeya indicated that there was improved flexibility in how and when they communicated with families. Educators commented that they could now work from locations other than the early childhood setting and at times that suited them. Therefore seeing this change as a positive outcome for them, as indicated by Anne Marie, "Storypark allows me to work from home, I no longer have to be at the centre to do my non-contact time, so it gives me more flexibility to work in a way that suits me and my family" (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one). Remembering that Anne Marie and Pareeya did not perceive Storypark to increase their workload significantly, it was interesting to note that both indicated that they frequently accessed Storypark after hours. Similarly, neither educator commented that they felt this was an intrusion on family time, or beyond the responsibilities

of their positions. The increased demand on educators' working hours and professional identity as a concern is further explored in Chapter five.

Educators using Storypark commented that they frequently interacted with families after hours and at times that suited families, which they viewed as positive with regard to collaborating with families. Educators indicated that they felt that this enhanced communications with families as it was in real time and, therefore, more meaningful. It was interesting to note that all educators using Storypark that contributed to this research felt that this was part of their role and what was necessary to be seen as a good educator. The following comments from Anne Marie supported this, "Educators should be responding to families in a way that meets a family's needs. If I get a notification at 20.00 from a parent concerned about something, then to reassure that parent and maintain good collaborative practice, I should respond" (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview two). This comment suggests that educators have accepted after-hours communication with families is part of their professional role. In fact, there was an underlying assumption that those who do not engage with families in an immediate way – for example, when a notification comes in, regardless of the time of day – were not fulfilling their role as an early childhood educator. This was evident when Anne Marie noted that "some teachers don't respond to families after hours but sharing with families and answering their questions is so important, it is part of our jobs" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation one). The evidence gathered through the interviews and observations in the setting would indicate that the level of educator commitment and dedication to collaborative practices with families was viewed as an indicator of educator quality. For example, as discussed by Anne Marie:

... we all need to respond to families' needs and answer questions when they ask, not two days later. If you are going to be a good educator, and if you want to achieve an Exceeding Rating, then you just need to do it. (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two)

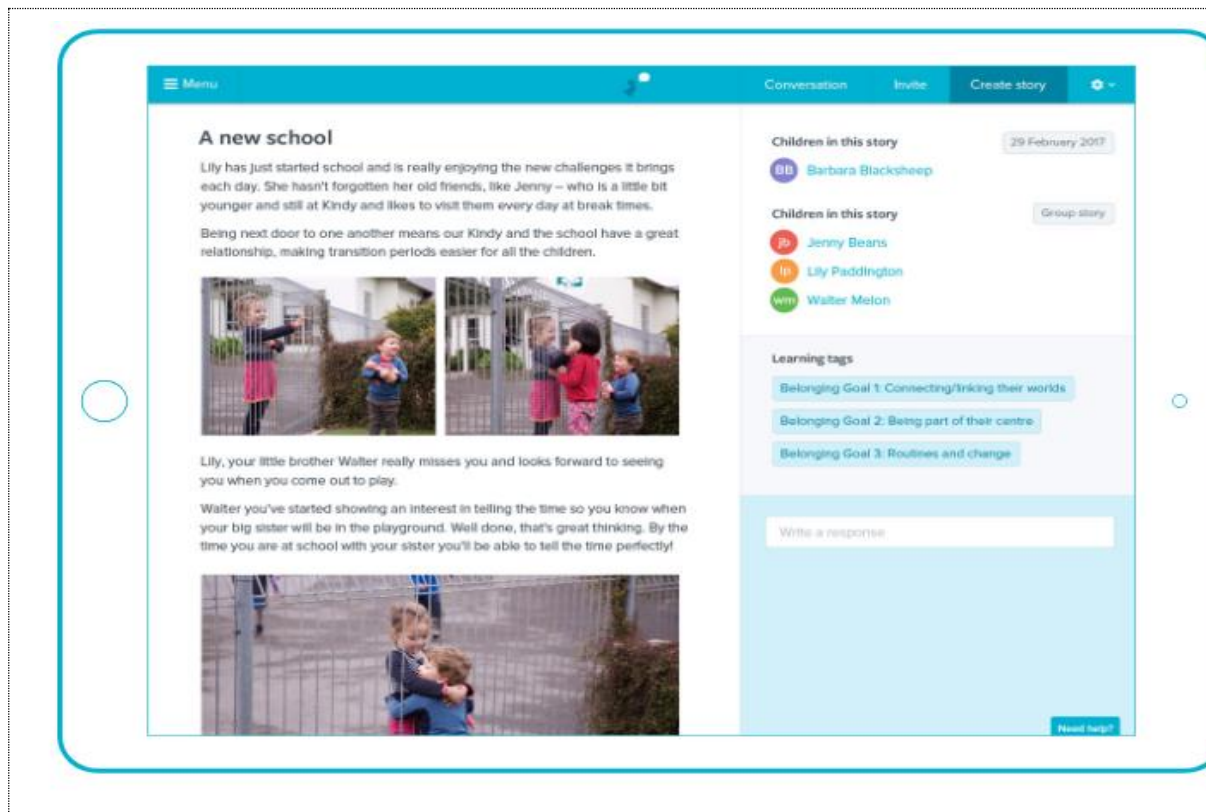
This comment from Anne Marie demonstrates that collaborating with families is perceived as an indicator of quality, and something to aspire to if wanting to receive the highest National Quality Framework Rating of Exceeding National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2012). It was apparent from educator interviews and observations in the setting that the use of Storypark had changed the nature of the way the educators worked in terms of the ways in which they worked, their physical location, and the addition of working after traditional hours.

#### **4.4.4 Content characteristics of collaborations**

As indicated by Anne Marie and Pareeya, the content of collaborations was primarily based around sharing curriculum information and documenting individual and group learning that had occurred. As mandated by the Australian National Quality Standards (NQS), educators are required to plan for and document the curriculum cycle and educational outcomes for children. Quality Area One, Educational Program and Practice, requires educators to evidence their curriculum planning, which is subsequently assessed through the Assessment and Rating process. Educators, in this case, indicated that Storypark had replaced many of their traditional ways of curriculum planning and documentation. For example, many of the Storypark posts replaced traditional ways of documenting learning stories that educators had previously completed using alternative paper-based or Microsoft programs. Both Pareeya and Anne Marie commented that they used Storypark functionality for curriculum planning and recording learning experiences, and documenting individual and group observations, such as in the case of learning stories (Carr & Lee, 2012). Furthermore, both educators also provided a curriculum planning document that was displayed on the wall for families who did not have Storypark or for anyone who wanted to view the program planning. Therefore, in the instance of curriculum planning, Storypark had not wholly replaced traditional practices. Nevertheless, educators felt more planning took place within Storypark than other formats, for example "I always either print out what I have on Storypark or do a word document just in case someone hasn't access

to Storypark, but I pretty much do it there now, and sometimes a reflective journal" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation one). This was supported throughout researcher observations in the setting when Anne Marie and Pareeya used Storypark on their Ipads to document and record children's learning, printing curriculum planning documents for families not subscribed to Storypark (observations one, two and three). A visual illustration of a Storypark post is featured in Figure 27 to demonstrate how educators are using Storypark to document and share children's learning.

**Figure 27: Storypark post**



In conducting a content analysis, it was established that the content of Storypark communications was heavily linked to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outcomes and used as evidence in documenting the learning that had occurred. During observations in the setting, the educators gave informed consent for the researcher to access curriculum planning documents and observations of children that further supported the use of the EYLF

within collaborations. Educators felt that the use of Storypark directly met the requirements of Quality Area One – Educational Program and Practice under the National Quality Standards (NQS). The functionality of Storypark allowed for videos and voice recordings to accompany learning stories, which allowed for the child's voice to be heard and shared with families. Posts were focused on making visible children's interests to families. These posts were based on what the children were engaged in and how this connected to curriculum frameworks. When asked about how decisions were made about what was posted, Pareeya provided some insight into how she selects information to capture and share on Storypark:

Storypark is great in that it has this section where you can record who you have done observations on, so it kind of lets you know who you haven't done for a while – so it kind of tells me that I have five learning stories on Ruby but only one on Will. That is how I know whom I need to focus on ... I also do group ones, and then I can share it with multiple families. I usually take photos or get Fatima to take the photos, and I write the story and then link it to the frameworks. That way it shows families what we are doing and why that is important in terms of the outcomes. (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two)

There appeared to be a range of factors that influenced the frequency and the type of content posted to Storypark. Factors included the level of staff qualifications and their amount of allocated non-contact time. Non-contact time, often referred to as planning time, is provided to educators under their various Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) as conditions of employment. In Australia, EBAs differ according to the agreed conditions of employment. Generally, Bachelor trained educators receive more than double the planning time of that of a Diploma or Certificate III educator as the expectations for planning and accountability are also greater. For example, a Bachelor trained educator teaching one fifteen-hour kindergarten group across a week would receive 7.5 hours of non-contact time, whereas the Diploma trained

educator would receive 1.5 hours of non-contact time. Bachelor trained educators are predominantly responsible for curriculum programming, with Diploma and Certificate III educators contributing in a less formal way.

In this setting, the educators holding a Bachelor qualification tended to take the lead on using Storypark and posted more frequently than those with lower-level qualifications. Pareeya and Anne Marie confirmed this through both observations in the setting and informal discussion. Anne Marie and Pareeya (Bachelor degree qualified educators) were allocated more planning time than Georgia and Fatima (Diploma and Certificate qualified respectively). Anne Marie and Pareeya indicated that they used non-contact time to complete documentation and send posts using Storypark; they also indicated that they posted after the teaching session, at night and on weekends. Anne Marie, reported that she accessed Storypark multiple times over twenty-four hours to either post to individual families or to check comments made by them. Diploma and Certificate level educators in the setting (Georgia and Fatima) noted that they posted during sessions with children, at quieter times during a session, but never after business hours or on weekends. Georgia and Fatima also noted that they were often responsible for taking photos for posts that were then uploaded by the Bachelor trained educators. Anne Marie and Pareeya tended to post learning stories, and more individual posts to families, while Georgia and Fatima posted more general content to shared spaces. When further questioned about the differences between Storypark use by staff, Georgia explained that "it was more of the teacher's role and they just assisted with the photos" (Georgia, Storypark, observation two).

In the observations and in discussion with all educators, it was further established that non-contact time and the amount of training provided were also factors that contributed to the Bachelor trained educators taking more of a lead with the use of Storypark. For example, Georgia and Fatima, who held Diploma and Certificate qualifications, indicated that they had

not received much training on Storypark and were unsure of capabilities and being able to post privately to individual families. The following statement from Georgia supports this:

I really only use Storypark to show families the photos of their children and what they are up to during the day. I don't know how to do much else on it, and I don't have time. I am always doing things with the children or tidying up. If it [posting on Storypark] is something hard, or I don't know how to do it on Storypark, then I just get Pareeya to do it, she is really good at using it. She went to a session on how to use it, and she helps all the rooms out ... I think she does it when the children aren't here, I take photos, and she uses them when she does her posts after the session. (Georgia, Storypark, observation one)

Historically, educators explained that, at this centre, they tended to keep paper-based checklists to record the frequency of individual observations of children, which was done both in and out of sessions. Whereas Storypark has this functionality inbuilt, recording both the observation itself and the frequency of observations, therefore assisting educators in tracking the number of observations carried out on individual children. Educators commented that this feature significantly assisted them with the requirement to keep individual documentation, making documentation practices more streamlined and less complex, and they could also be used as evidence in meeting compliance requirements, as Anne Marie noted:

Once you have taken the photos and written the learning story, it is really simple to just share it with the parents. You can even get the child to add a voice message. Parents can look at it, comment; you can even set learning goals about that child. Then you have everything in all one place. We haven't had our assessment and ratings visit yet, but I think this will help. (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two)

Educators commented that they felt that Storypark offered the advantages of ease of documenting learning and recording collaborations with families. These observations were then measurable for Assessment and Rating visits, as previously discussed in Chapter two, section 2.2.5. Furthermore, educators perceived Storypark documentation as positive for meeting both compliance requirements under the National Quality Standards (NQS) as well as meeting the family's needs. This was evidenced by Pareeya:

When we get an assessment and rating visit, it will be all simple; everything is there. We can show our program, observations and interactions with families. I'm not sure what we would do if they came when we had no internet. (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two)

As previously discussed, Assessment and Ratings are carried out to assess the quality of a setting against seven documented Quality Standards (NQS) and result in a setting receiving a rating from 'Significant Improvement Required' to 'Excellent' (refer to Chapter two, section 2.2.5, as this was discussed in more detail there). In delving deeper into the compliance aspect of meeting the NQS, Pareeya indicated that she felt Storypark would assist in not only Meeting but Exceeding the National Quality Standards (NQS) when they had their Assessment and Rating visit. Pareeya believed that this was due to the fact she would be able to clearly demonstrate how she used Storypark for curriculum programming, individual observations and collaborating with families, hence meeting multiple elements of the National Quality Standards (NQS) in a streamlined way. Through informal discussion and observations in the setting, it appeared that all educators, regardless of their qualification, perceived Storypark as evidencing quality to support their Assessment and Rating visit. Similarly, researcher observations in the setting found that the majority of discussion around the use of Storypark for curriculum planning and observation was concerned with evidencing the NQS.

#### **4.4.5 Inbound and outbound communication**

The nature of the collaborations using Storypark tended to be outbound, with educators being the primary contributors. According to Pareeya and Anne Marie, the majority of posts were created and submitted by the Bachelor qualified educator and were used as a means of documenting learning and a way of initiating collaboration with families. When asked, Pareeya responded that Storypark was used flexibly, with no clear agenda. Pareeya and Anne Marie commented that they intended to elicit responses from families, yet that in reality "it tended to be very one-sided communication" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two). The educators commented that the majority of families tended to respond to posts with simple comments or likes. However, Pareeya indicated that a small number of families used Storypark to share experiences undertaken on weekends or family holidays as a way of communicating with others in the setting and that this was very well received by educators: "we love it when we get something back from families" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two).

In anecdotal discussions with both Anne Marie and Pareeya on the one-sided nature of collaborations, both indicated that they believed families were too busy to contribute, and this was likely the reason why collaborations were limited. Although not explicitly stated, families not contributing to curriculum decisions appeared not to be of great significance to educators. The following statement from Anne Marie supported this, "I know what I am doing in my programming each week, I know the frameworks, so it doesn't really matter if parents don't contribute" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two). Similarly, Pareeya commented that "parents can add value, but it's not like I don't know how to teach without them" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two). Anne Marie and Pareeya considered that they were, in fact, promoting co-contribution from parents to their curriculum, by posting about the activities children were undertaking. When prompted further about this, Pareeya commented that "when I post a photo of the children in the sandpit making rivers with water, I hope that families will

like it, but I also hope that they then tell me something" (Pareeya, Storypark, observation one). However, educators indicated that, generally, families did not respond or contribute a great deal. Therefore, curriculum decision making and co-curriculum was problematic in terms of meeting the NQS. A small number of families shared experiences that were incorporated into the curriculum, and this was seen as curriculum co-contribution. For example, Pareeya indicated that:

I don't generally get much back from families. Sometimes they might mention what they did as a family on the weekend, or what has become the latest obsession for their child, like dinosaurs or sharks or something ... it is that I can then use in planning my activities for the fortnight. (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two)

This co-contribution did generally occur after hours or on weekends, yet the educator felt it important to respond in real time, making the communication meaningful and assisting in maintaining authentic collaborative partnerships:

Yes, I probably shouldn't respond on a Sunday night or on the school holidays, but if a family have posted about going to the zoo on that day and I wait until Monday morning or the start of next term then I have to remember to actually post then, and by that time the family and child have forgotten, and the opportunity to really engage is gone. (Anne Marie, Storypark, interview one)

There was a small number of families who shared their perspectives on using social media to collaborate. These contributions were made through the initial parent survey and anecdotal interactions with the researcher during observations within each setting. In this particular Storypark case, family perspectives added great value in terms of discussing the content and frequency of Storypark posts from educators to families. Although discussed in detail in Chapter four, section 4.6, it is important to note here that families' responses to Storypark were

varied, yet there was a commonality that Storypark posts could be burdensome, resulting in parent pressure to respond, and associated feelings of guilt for not responding. This was supported by the following statement from the Virgato family, "Sometimes I just don't have time during the day to look at posts from kindergarten, does that make me a bad parent? But I also have to work." (Virgato family, Storypark, observation three). Similarly, from the Williams family:

I just don't want to be involved – I don't ask them to contribute to my daily work, so why would I want to contribute to what is their daily work. The PIQ or QIP or whatever it is, [referring to the Quality Improvement Plan, see section 2.2.5] it has nothing to do with me, and it is their job, I don't want to be part of it. (Williams family, Storypark, observation three)

Family perspectives and the implications for collaborative practice are further discussed in Chapter five, section 5.3.

Throughout interviews with educators and researcher observations in the setting, it was unclear what educators considered as co-curriculum and shared decision making and, for the purposes of this study, outside the scope of this research. Further research of what is considered co-curriculum and shared curriculum could provide more insight and add to the academic debate.

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter two, collaboration can be understood to have stages or degrees, ranging from 'Informing' to 'Engaging and Leading' (Amendt, 2008). According to Amendt (2008), informing is a one-way flow of information from the educational setting to the family, whereas Engaging and Leading occur when communication is two-way, shared and mutual. The evidence presented in this case study suggests that the use of Storypark tends to be located in the Informing stage rather than the engaging stage. Educators affirmed that Storypark posts tend to be one-sided and often elicit no responses from families, hence

using the model presented by Amendt (2008), the collaborative practice, in this case, would therefore be classified as Informing. Chapter five provides further discussion in relation to the implications for educators, families and collaborative practice alike.

#### **4.4.6 Privacy and ownership**

The Cluster Manager at this service had mandated the use of Storypark in 2016 as a means of collaborating with families and was financially responsible for its application. Information regarding Storypark was disseminated with all families being asked to provide signed consent. Anne Marie explained that gathering signed consent forms for the taking and sharing of photos had always been policy at the setting and that Storypark was an addition that also required signed consent. According to educators, and in addition to information on the Storypark website, the content on Storypark is owned by each individual family, and not by the centre. Storypark advertises on their website that Storypark does not own data and that parents control their child's digital footprint. Educators in the setting were unsure of how the privacy and permission worked, aside from knowing which families had not signed consent forms and did not want their child involved with Storypark. When asked about privacy and permission, educators were unsure of the particularities and believed that the Cluster Manager had investigated this; for example, Georgia commented "I don't really know what the privacy settings or levels are all about, I know ... [cluster manager} worked it all out, and that's why parents sign the consent" (Georgia, Storypark, observation two).

Five families at the centre opted not to be involved in the use of the Storypark app. Anne Marie explained that these families advised that they did not want a digital footprint of their child on social media and therefore did not want their child to be part of any Storypark use. Accordingly, these five families were provided written documentation of learning and face-to-face interactions with educators in lieu of Storypark, whereas parents who had consented received

documentation via Storypark. Anne Marie and Pareeya commented that in this arrangement, families were not disadvantaged, although the number of interactions with these families was less, and educators felt that families missed out on important collaborative opportunities. This was evidenced by Anne Marie:

I have a couple of families who don't want anything to do with Storypark. It is a shame really, I think they are missing out on so much. I don't really see what the big deal is. It is a private space. Nobody else has access. I respect their decision though if they don't want their child online, I just send home printed learning stories or notes. They seem happy enough with that. (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation three)

Access to and ownership of the content posted on Storypark was something discussed by both parents and educators during this case study. Storypark is clear in all documentation that families own the content, however, not all families appeared to be aware of this (family perspectives are discussed in detail in Chapter four, section 4.6). It was unclear what privacy and ownership information was disseminated to families by the Cluster Manager. Educators had concerns over access to the information kept in Storypark in terms of meeting National Quality Standards (NQS) and regulation of secure storage of information. For example, The Education and Care Services National Regulations (ACECQA, 2010) mandates that certain information is collected upon enrolment and dictates how this information is stored. Educators also raised concerns over Assessment and Ratings visits and compliance, not always being able to access information quickly due to their own knowledge of operating systems as well as internet access. Georgia commented that:

I don't really know how to use it (Storypark) that well, so if the person [assessor] asked me to show how we do something, I don't think I would be able to. Pareeya probably

can, but what if she isn't here or if the internet isn't working again? (Georgia, Storypark, observation three)

Georgia's concerns were based on the notion that Storypark was the main repository of evidence of meeting many of the outcomes of the NQS. Having discussed permissions, privacy and storage of content, the following section will outline the use of Storypark in terms of policy within the setting.

The Cluster Manager had a social media policy in place; however, although all educators in the study were asked, only one educator was familiar with it. Similarly, Storypark has guidelines for use and cyber safety and privacy recommendations, yet, when asked, only one educator had read the information, "I know that we have a policy about it, but I'm not sure if I read it, I probably did when I started but I don't think I can actually remember much about it" (Fatima, Storypark, observation two). The Cluster Manager's social media policy addressed the use of social media by staff in a range of contexts. Common principles of the appropriate use of work time, and representing the organisation in a positive light, were strongly represented throughout. However, there was no mention of the use of Storypark. In regard to individual staff interacting with families in an online space such as Facebook, the policy states that this activity "may be a breach of confidentiality and is unwise to do so" (Early Years Manager, Social Media Policy, 2016, p. 6). The policy discusses that families who make contact on forums such as Facebook should be advised to "make contact on normal work channels" (p. 6). In explaining private and personal use of social media, the policy outlined that social networking activities should not interfere with work commitments. It goes further to explain that "excessive online use, outside of business purposes, will be investigated (p. 6)." It is unclear what is deemed as excessive use, or even if the use of Storypark after hours to communicate with families could be deemed as inappropriate and excessive. However, Pareeya and Anne Marie, educators who viewed the use of Storypark positively in terms of their

personal flexibility of work location and hours, may not perceive their use as inappropriate or excessive. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the use of Storypark to legitimise daily activities as part of accountability practices is core business in working with children. Similarly, more broadly, educators who are posting about activities and links to the curriculum at 10 pm and responding to families on a Sunday evening could be operating outside reasonable use guidelines. The above reflections bring to light the demands on educators' working hours in terms of presence bleed (Gregg, 2011). This term is described as defining work commitments that bleed into personal time. These challenges are further explored in Chapter five, section 5.2.

#### **4.4.7 The possibilities of Third Space and quality within the case**

In using Storypark to collaborate with families, new possibilities emerged in this third space between home and the centre. One new collaborative possibility that emerged in the third space was centred around the type of information that was shared with families. Anne Marie and Pareeya felt that connections between children's daily activities and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outcomes were now more visible to families. Prior to the introduction of Storypark, educators commented that they displayed their curriculum programming on the wall in the setting, yet they believed that the majority of families never looked at it. The assumption, then, made by educators was that prior to Storypark families had less exposure to, and therefore knowledge of, the EYLF and Learning Outcomes. However, it could be questioned that exposure to curriculum planning and EYLF does not necessarily equate to families' understanding of, or collaboration with, the curriculum. Hence, the third space enabled assumptions of knowledge to be questioned. This was evidenced through the following statement from Pareeya:

I always try to include the learning outcome in what I send to families; that way, they can see what we are achieving and what the outcomes are all about. I am not sure that they actually look at them, but I feel like I should put them in anyway. (Pareeya, Storypark, observation two)

It appeared that the type of information shared had changed with the introduction of Storypark, with a sharper focus on demonstrating programming to families, regardless of whether families were viewing the content or not. Again, this reinforces the continuum of collaboration as discussed by Amendt (2008) and locates this centre in the Informing stage due to its one-sided nature. Communication was also seen to be more accessible for both parents and educators, which was something that emerged in the third space. The educators and families reported that Storypark allowed for an increase in frequency and access to interactions, in an almost real-time reporting context. It also allowed for communications to be shared with extended family such as grandparents overseas, which is something that traditional practice generally does not afford. Comments from Anne Marie supported this, "I have one family with relatives in Greece, I post a learning story, and this can then be shared with the grandparents in Greece instantly, it connects everyone" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two). The increase in frequency of communication and the ability to share communications with a wider network was visible due to the context of the third space. Hence, without the use of the third space theoretical framework the above practices would not have been enabled.

The perceived benefits of Storypark may be explained in terms of functionality. Storypark has strong connections to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and educators believed this assisted in meeting requirements of the NQS in a streamlined way. Although Storypark appears to have offered functionality that assists educators in their programming, the functionality of the application, rather than new possibilities in a collaborative partnership, appeared to be the focus. It is important, then, to consider these reported benefits to

collaborative practice in terms of quality in the third space to better examine whose needs are being met by the use of Storypark for collaborative practice. The concept of quality and whose needs are being addressed are further discussed in Chapter five, section 5.2.

#### **4.4.8 Case two through a quality lens**

At the centre of this discussion on quality and Storypark is understanding the fundamental difference in the nature of the intended collaboration between educators and families. It was apparent that educators were using Storypark functionalities to meet many of the requirements of the National Quality Standards (NQS) such as curriculum planning, sharing curriculum decisions, and individual learning in combination with a desire to increase their collaborative practices. However, many families indicated that they did not want to be part of these curriculum decisions and were overwhelmed by the content and frequency of requests. In fact, the pressure to respond and be seen as "being a good parent" (Virgato family, Storypark, observation two) could have a detrimental effect on collaborative partnerships. The perspectives of families are discussed collectively across all three cases as there were many commonalities; this is presented in Chapter four, section 4.6.

The functionality of being able to monitor parents' access to Storypark, which provided analytics to educators, is a new collaborative possibility that could have a negative effect on the quality of the partnership between families and educators. This was particularly evident in the case of Storypark, where the education setting could monitor a family's access and use of Storypark. The Virgato family commented that "they felt pressure" (Virgato family, Storypark, observation two) to respond, this could be further compounded by the functionality of Storypark which enables statistics tracking, reporting on levels of access and use. Furthermore, Anne Marie commented that "we can see who actually looks at the posts, some families are great, and I know they look, but with others, there is no point posting as they don't even log

on" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two). The statistics tracking functionality of Storypark may hinder partnerships with families if families are feeling pressured or judged to collaborate.

#### **4.4.9 Summary of case two – collaborative practice through Storypark**

The use of Storypark as a third space environment appears to have provided new possibilities for collaboration in terms of the types of information. In particular, Anne Marie and Pareeya felt that Storypark enabled them to highlight the connections and the learning that occurred in the setting to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in a visible way that families could understand. The perception that exposure to the EYLF equates to a better understanding of the EYLF is an interesting aside, one which would benefit from further research. Increasing (or enhancing) co-curriculum collaboration was a focus for the setting, and although they did have a small number of families contributing by sharing family experiences, educators did not express that shared curriculum decisions were a focus for families. It was evident from the data that educators who held a Bachelor degree were using Storypark in a different way to those who did not have the qualification. Furthermore, it was identified by participants that educators with the Bachelor qualification had undergone significantly more training in using Storypark than others and were therefore using Storypark to its full functionality. The complexities of Storypark use between Bachelor and non Bachelor trained educators was therefore deemed to be due to a range of factors, including increased awareness about the Storypark platform and its functionality and the increased amount of planning time available to these educators.

Through interviews and observations in the centre, it was uncovered that the Bachelor trained educators were engaging and responding via Storypark in hours that would be considered outside traditional and reasonable hours. Nevertheless, they saw this as a necessary requirement for being a quality educator. Quality as a concept was discussed in the literature in Chapter two

and is further explored in the Discussion and Conclusion, Chapter five. Although all families who took part in this study reported that Storypark enabled ease of access to educators, this was also seen as a negative by some families, as the increased level of communication was perceived as overwhelming families and resulting in parenting guilt. It would appear that Storypark may present some possibilities in the third space; however, the implications of this may not always be positive.

#### **4.5 Case three – Facebook**

This case study was concerned with the use of Facebook in building collaborative partnerships with families. Facebook was the focus of the case study, exploring and understanding its use to determine if new possibilities emerge when Facebook is used to collaborate with families.

This case study was situated across three different early childhood settings:

**Setting One:** A small kindergarten located in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia

**Setting Two:** A small kindergarten located in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia

**Setting Three:** A long day care setting in regional Victoria, Australia

At the time of the research, there were two educators in each of the three settings (total of six) who volunteered to take part in this case study. In setting one was Vanna, who held the Bachelor qualification and Natalie, who held a Diploma qualification. Setting two was Maddison, who held the Bachelor qualification and Maria, who held the Diploma qualification. Finally, in setting three was Elly, who held the Bachelor qualification and Karen, who held the Diploma qualification.

The three settings are using a combination of public and private Facebook pages (refer to Chapter three, section 3.9.2 for an explanation of Facebook settings), as well as the private messaging function, to collaborate with families. Three settings were chosen for this case to allow for comparison between the ways in which public and private Facebook pages were used, as well as personal messaging via Facebook was used with families. Additionally, the families who took part in this research were the McWhinney, Smith and Reilly families.

#### **4.5.1 Collaborative practices**

During the interviews and observations within the three settings, it was identified that the educators shared a common understanding of collaborative practice with families. These included valuing families' contributions, respecting families' differences, engaging in building rapport with families, and working together to benefit outcomes for children. This was illustrated by Vanna in a one-on-one interview when she described collaborative practice as "getting to know each and every family and what makes them a family; respecting and embracing each family and working with them" (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one). Similarly, Maria described collaborative practice as "listening to families and helping them to achieve their goals. Keeping them informed about what is going on and making them feel part of the kindergarten" (Maria, Facebook setting two, interview one). Likewise, Elly, from Facebook setting three described collaborative practice as "forming a community of educators, parents and children who can work respectfully together, really listening to families and enacting that" (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one). Participants' definitions of collaborative practice across the three settings tended to be very similar in terms of describing their partnerships with families, the co-contribution to curriculum, and open communication.

All educators who took part in this Facebook case study, regardless of setting, held similar definitions of collaborative practice with families. However, there was a distinct difference in

attitude and understanding of the role of the educator in relation to the National Quality Standard (NQS), Element 6.2, which states that “families are supported in their parenting role, and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected” (ACECQA, 2012, section 6). This was relevant in the context of this research as the underlying premise of the Australian Government’s ECEC reform agenda, and hence the establishment of the NQS and EYLF was that investing in the early years as a form of social investment would reap reward in terms of future productivity (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Morel et al., 2012). However, as discussed in Chapter two (see 2.2.3), Rouse and Obrien (2017) oppose the view that families need support and suggest that this way of thinking positions families in a deficit model. In this case study, educators’ understanding of and attitude towards Element 6.2 of the NQS varied, with some educators positioning parents as requiring support, whereas others were cautious about a deficit model.

Educators within Facebook setting 1 and Facebook setting 2 positioned themselves as knowledge givers with university qualifications and felt that supporting families was part of their role. This was supported by the following comment from Vanna, “I give families lots of support, it is part of an educator's role to assist families with things such as nutrition, sleeping, behaviour and education. In fact, it’s all education, isn’t it!” (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one).

Similarly, Maddison from setting two indicated that “supporting families means lots of things and is really important. I often include information in the newsletter on positive parenting and behaviour management and things like that. Of course, the ones who need it often don’t read it” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, interview one).

Whereas Rachel from case study one (email) believed that supporting parents in their role was problematic as it assumed that families wanted and were open to advice and that, in fact, educators were the experts over parents. The following quote from Rachel supported this:

6.2 [of the National Quality Standard] is a really fine line. Yes, we want to support families, but not all families need or want support, and who says that I am the expert on parenting? I don't think that I would like someone telling me how to parent, I don't even have children so isn't that a bit presumptuous? (Rachel, case study one, email, interview one)

The data gathered through interviews and observations indicates that the notion of supporting families as described within NQS 6.2 is problematic when educators hold varied understandings of their role. More broadly, it would appear that NQS 6.2 positions parents as requiring assistance and reinforcing a deficit model, as discussed by Rouse and Obrien (2017). Similarly, as discussed by Rouse (2012b), authentic collaboration is difficult to achieve when one party holds the balance of power. The implications of power imbalances in reciprocity would suggest that mandates such as NQS 6.2 may undermine the nature of partnerships themselves.

#### **4.5.2 Use of social media in each setting**

Three settings were chosen for this case to allow for comparison between the ways in which Facebook public and private pages, as well as private messaging, was used with families. The ways in which each setting used Facebook are outlined below:

**Setting one:** Vanna and Natalie used a private Facebook page to collaborate with families. Only current families were members of the Facebook page. Families in this

setting had signed informed consent for images of children to be used on the Facebook page.

**Setting two:** Maddison and Maria used a public Facebook page to collaborate with families. Maria and Maddison used their personal Facebook accounts with some families in the setting, being Facebook friends, and used private messaging (PM) to communicate with specific families. Families in this setting had signed publicity disclosure documents, and educators felt that this covered all forms of communication and, therefore, extended to the use of Facebook.

**Setting three:** Elly and Karen used a private Facebook page to collaborate with families. Elly and Karen used personal Facebook accounts with some families in the setting, being Facebook friends, and used private messaging (PM) to communicate with specific families. Families in this setting had signed informed consent for images of children to be used on the Facebook page.

All three settings used some form of informed consent. These are further discussed in section 4.5.6. The following section discusses the ways in which each setting has used Facebook to complement or replace existing collaborative practices.

Setting one offered a range of collaborative practices and saw the use of Facebook as an additional feature that enhanced practice, but not one that replaced existing practices. Vanna and Natalie, in setting one, indicated that they used Facebook to enhance the current collaborative practices. However, practices such as inviting parent helpers, newsletters and paper-based documentation remained. The use of Facebook in setting one appeared to be centred around sharing communications and building a sense of connection between the kindergarten and families. This was supported by Vanna:

... we use Facebook to reach those families who wouldn't otherwise connect with us, so working families or often dads whom we don't see. We still do all the other things like parent helpers, newsletters and noticeboards, but Facebook just makes us more accessible. (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one)

Setting one employed a philosophy of not stipulating a strict drop off time so families "dribble in which allows for more time to a one-to-one conversation with each family" (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation one). Vanna and Natalie affirmed that they valued the face-to-face nature of communications and, as indicated by Natalie when she noted that the educators "used Facebook as another way of engaging and collaborating with families" (Natalie, Facebook setting one, observation two).

In contrast, settings two and three adopted Facebook as a replacement for existing and traditional practices such as parent helpers, daily reflections and newsletters. All educators in settings two and three felt that Facebook could potentially replace practices that families were believed to no longer have time for, such as reading notices and assisting in the setting. Karen illustrated this, "our families are too busy to stand and read notice boards when they arrive, we need to get with the times and get our information out in twenty-first-century ways. Facebook is everywhere, like everyone has it" (Karen, Facebook setting three, observation one). Similarly, Maddison commented that:

... families are on Facebook all the time. It is easier to get them to read the newsletter on Facebook than it is if I send it home in the children's bags. We hardly get any parent helpers anymore, people are just too busy. Facebook is like a way of replacing that, we can stay connected, let them know what is going on, and they can talk to us too. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation one)

Maddison and Maria, in setting two, indicated that they used Facebook as a way of communicating with families and illustrating for families the activities that children engage in, for example:

I post lots of things on Facebook. I use it to let families know what is going on at our Kindergarten, what activities the children are doing, and what might be coming up. I can use it to do my daily or weekly reflections, and it connects the parents to what their children are doing. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation one)

Although all settings used Facebook in different ways, there were some commonalities that will be further explored. The themes that emerged from the interviews and observations in all settings were:

- Immediacy and access
- Content characteristics of collaborations
- Inbound and outbound communication
- Privacy and ownership

These significant themes will next be explored.

### **4.5.3 Immediacy and access**

In all three settings, the most widely cited advantages to using Facebook to collaborate with families were the ease of access, the widespread use of Facebook as a form of social media, and the perceived immediacy of communication. All educators who participated in this research felt that Facebook offered them a direct channel of communication to families that was fast and readily accessed by all. This was supported by Maddison from setting two, “the best thing about using Facebook is that all of our families have it and know how to use it. I can post something, and they get it immediately. That makes sending reminders so easy” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, interview one). Similarly, Vanna from setting one indicated

that “Facebook allows me to connect with families quickly. They normally always have their phones with them, so sending information is fast and effective” (Vanna, Facebook setting two, observation one).

The term ‘immediacy’ was primarily driven by the educators’ references to how quickly they were able to disseminate information and respond to families. This was similar to that of case study two, Storypark, and likewise, terms such as ‘convenience’ and ‘asynchronous’ could also be equally relevant. For example, Elly commented that “Facebook is so immediate, I can literally press post, and everyone has it at the same time” (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one). However, in this Elly is referring to disseminating information and not necessarily a two-way collaborative process. Participants from all three settings listed the main advantages of using Facebook to collaborate with families as access and immediacy of communication. As educators used the term immediacy to discuss their use of Facebook, it has been applied in this case.

Educators across all three settings proposed the benefits of Facebook as being related to the fact that they felt it allowed real-time documentation and communication with families. Elly and Karen, from setting three who were using a private Facebook page, saw an advantage in being able to take a photo of a child immersed in a particular experience and post that on Facebook within five to ten minutes, allowing the families to experience that in real time. For example, Karen commented that:

... last week I had a child who had only been with us for about a week. I was able to take a photo and send that to mum, showing that he was happy and no longer crying. She said that really helped her through her day knowing that he was okay, she was really grateful. (Karen, Facebook setting two, observation two)

Although in the example provided by Karen, the family did access content in a real-time way, the perception of families being available and able to access content in an immediate way did not appear to be a consideration. This was supported by Maddison, who indicated that she “posted throughout the day and often forgot to check in and see if families had even responded, we are all too busy I suppose” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation one). The above example indicates that although educators do understand that families are busy and often may not access content in a real-time way, educators still perceived the benefit of Facebook to be that it enables real-time access. In the case of using Facebook, it was perceived that this real-time connection to families enhanced the overall collaboration between the setting and the family: “Social media has definitely enhanced collaborative partnerships at [name of centre] – parent to centre; centre to families, educators to families and back to educators; families to families; and occasionally children to centre/educators” (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one). Similarly, Vanna commented that “being able to use Facebook to communicate to families really adds to our connection with families, they love to see their child taking part in kindergarten activities” (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation two).

Throughout interviews and observations in the setting, the use of Facebook and the implications on educators' workloads was discussed. There were distinct differences in educator qualifications and the ways in which educators used Facebook that correlated to a perceived increase or decrease in workload. All educators who were Diploma trained, Natalie, Maria and Karen, indicated that their workload was unaffected by the use of Facebook and that demands of their role had remained consistent over the past five to ten years. The following comments from Natalie supported this:

... my job is pretty much the same as it has always been. I suppose it is a little bit harder as our days are now 7.5 hours compared to 5 hours [reflective of the increase in kindergarten

hours overall, and the move from 3 x 5hour sessions to 2 x 7.5-hour sessions] but that's about it. (Natalie, Facebook setting one, observation two)

Similarly, Karen indicated that "I don't think my workload has increased. I use Facebook to post on our page, but I don't really worry about it. Sometimes I might like something someone said, but I don't think that is work" (Karen, Facebook setting three, observation two). Juxtaposing this was Bachelor trained educators' views of workload. Vanna, Maddison and Elly indicated that their workload had increased under reforms such as the National Quality Standards (NQS) and Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and that this increase in workload required them to work after traditional work hours.

Furthermore, the ways in which educators used Facebook, and whether they used the private messaging (PM) function, appeared to have implications on the areas of their workload that had increased or decreased. For example, Maddison and Maria from setting one, along with Elly and Karen from setting two, all used private messaging with families, and all reported an increase in the number of after-hours communications with families. To enable all voices to be heard, educators' perceptions of workload are discussed setting by setting.

#### **Setting One** – Vanna and Natalie, private Facebook page, no private messaging

Vanna, the Bachelor qualified educator in Facebook setting one, indicated that she had felt that the demands of compliance had increased her workload in evidencing her practices, for example:

I definitely have to spend more time doing paperwork now. There are just more requirements now that I need to show how I am meeting. Yes, I suppose that collaborating with families is one of them, but it is more about the QIP (Quality Improvement Plan, refer to 2.2.5) and each one of the standards [National Quality Standards]. (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one)

Vanna also commented that the increase in workload demands due to compliance under the NQS had increased her workload overall and had also required her to complete work after traditional hours. The following statement from Vanna supported this, “I never get through it all, I don’t think anyone does. I do take work home, and often work every night and sometimes on weekends as well” (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation one). Natalie, the Diploma qualified educator in Facebook setting one, indicated that she did not perceive her workload to have changed.

A discussion on the ways in which working hours had changed was provided by Vanna from Facebook setting 1. Her story below appears to be similar to many interviewed as part of this research:

Yes, my traditional working hours have definitely changed – well, actually my unpaid hours have expanded exponentially. I find I need to start early, and work back late, in order to be more productive – as outside of ‘work hours’ I can focus more fully on the tasks at hand, with no interruptions (telephone calls; interactions with children, parents, staff, management, etc.)

When I first started teaching (1982), I taught two classes of twenty-five children, with each class attending for 4 x 2.5-hour classes per week (can you imagine!! – you would have just settled back at home or wherever after having dropped your child at kinder before you would have to turn around and head back to collect them!) As the social fabric changed, with a greater percentage of women re-entering the workforce, 2 x 5-hour classes met the needs of the parent cohort. Workload was not excessive, so, aside from committee meetings and working bees, not many out-of-paid hours were required.

With the introduction of the frameworks, plus universal access, I started working 2 x 7.5-hour classes. Paid preparation time was woefully inadequate during this time of

great change within the sector (2009), especially with the steep learning curve and massive extra hours associated with attending professional development and then writing the School Transition Learning and Development Statements. On average, I would have worked an additional twenty hours of unpaid hours per week in order to complete all the admin/preparation requirements and research into the EYLF and Student Transition Learning and Development Statements (STLDS) etc.

Currently, I feel there is a major growth surge within the sector. There is a plethora of PD organisations, online training, ACECQA and other peak body organisation resources online, podcasts, Facebook pages, etc. which I access after hours (again, no distractions, comfort of home, not enough paid hours).

The amount of paperwork has totally overwhelmed some educators and has eroded their passion for the profession. Misconceptions around, for example, how many observations must be written on each child per month has further exhausted some teachers, and their creativity and spontaneity is ebbing away.

The general consensus seems to be that prep time is for writing obs/data collection; curriculum planning; QIP; educational leadership; ensuring compliance paperwork is current; meeting/exceeding NQS and report writing, and all other research, reflection, PD, children's portfolios, inspiration-seeking, Pinterest and Facebook research, etc. is done during leisure/unpaid time. (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one)

**Setting Two** – Maddison and Maria, public Facebook page, use of private messaging

Maddison, who is the Bachelor qualified educator in Facebook setting two, indicated that there was an increase in compliance workload overall, yet that Facebook had also reduced her workload in relation to communicating with families, as communication was streamlined and delivered to all families consistently. The following statement from Maddison supported this,

“I think it [Facebook] makes communication more streamlined, and it is a one-stop process that reaches the maximum number of families. So, in some respects, it lessens the workload” (Maddison, Facebook setting three, observation one). However, Maddison indicated that her workload had increased in terms of working after hours and that this was due to both an overall increase in workload more broadly, as well as using Facebook after hours. For example, Maddison commented:

There really is more work that I need to do now, compared with say six years ago when I started. I am faster at it now than six years ago when it was all new, but there is definitely an increase. I generally spend some time most nights doing work. I try to stay back at work so that I don’t have to lug things home. I do check Facebook every night, A LOT! If a parent responds to my posts or posts something, I think it is important that I respond. How will I encourage them to use Facebook if they get nothing back from me? It does help me to get work done when I am sitting waiting at the doctor’s or something, so that makes it a positive. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, interview one)

Through observations in the setting, Maria indicated that her workload had not changed, yet she did comment that she sometimes interacts with families on Facebook after her kindergarten session, for example:

I sometimes get a notification after the session that a parent has liked something, or they send me a message [private message] with a question. I usually answer it, if I can, or I refer it to Maddison if it is something more for the teacher (Maria, Facebook setting two, observation one).

**Setting Three** – Elly and Karen, private Facebook page, use of private messaging

Elly, who is the Bachelor qualified educator in Facebook Setting three, indicated that her workload had increased overall and that using Facebook had similarly increased her workload, requiring her to work after hours. The following statement from Elly supported this:

There has been an increase in my workload. I do more paperwork now, ticking the boxes and making sure that everything is in order. The QIP [Quality Improvement Plan] is taking forever and is pretty much just left up to me. I do spend more time communicating with families, but that's just part of the job. With Facebook though, I can answer them from anywhere though. (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one)

Similarly, in relation to Facebook, Elly commented that:

With Facebook, we are kind of on call. It is part of the service as well ... not that we are a twenty-four-hour service, but through Facebook you get those messages from families at 11 pm that really want to have an answer before their child comes back in at 7 am. So, I think that it is part of our job to answer those questions or alleviate those concerns in a timely manner. So, I think that it is an effective communication tool in that regard. (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one)

In discussing this further with Elly during observations in the setting, Elly indicated that she received between one and ten private messages from families a day and that these were often related to a range of concerns. However, upon further investigation, it appeared that after-hours communications using the private messaging function were rarely related to educational practice and were not necessarily areas that required an educator's immediate attention. For example:

I might get one message today, or I might get ten. Each day is different. If we have something going on at the centre, or fees invoices went out, then I will definitely get

lots of messages ... I get things like: My child didn't attend that day, so why do I have to pay?; Have you seen my child's teddy, he had it this morning when I dropped him off, now it is gone; When is chocolate money due back? If I am getting lots of the same questions from different parents, I will sometimes send out a quick notification so, like, chocolate money due on Monday, otherwise I just work my way through them all. (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two)

Although posts done by educators may not be regarded as increasing workloads directly, answering private messages from families is by implication. What was noted by Maddison (setting two) and Elly (setting three) was that there was a change in the way that educators worked and that Facebook opened up their working hours, essentially making them on call. For example, when Maddison commented that she could respond to families while waiting for the doctor, and similarly when Elly mentioned that she could answer families from anywhere. Through interviews and observations, the notion of being accessible to families after hours was not perceived negatively and, in fact, appeared to be a change in attitude of what was now merely part of the role of an early childhood educator. Elly's comment that "I think it is part of our job" highlights the shifting nature and demands on educators, and was similar to that presented in the Storypark case (refer to Chapter four, section 4.4). The role of the educator and associated implications is further discussed in Chapter five.

#### **4.5.4 Content characteristics of collaborations**

In examining the Facebook pages and through discussions with educators, there appears to be a difference in the content of posts and privacy settings in Facebook pages; for this reason, each will be addressed separately.

##### **Public Facebook pages – setting two**

Setting two was the only Facebook setting that used a public Facebook page. Public Facebook pages essentially mean that anyone can view the content, request to be a member, and post comments on the page. As previously discussed, families in this setting had signed publicity release forms, and educators indicated that they perceived this as including posting on Facebook. As outlined in Chapter four, section 4.5.1, the educators Maddison and Maria employed the use of Facebook to replace existing practices such as a newsletter, daily reflections and notices to families. They also used the public Facebook page for providing general information and for advertising purposes.

As mandated by the Australian National Quality Standards (NQS), educators are required to plan for and document the curriculum cycle and educational outcomes for children. Quality Area One, Educational Program and Practice, requires educators to evidence their curriculum planning, which is subsequently assessed through the Assessment and Rating process. In Facebook setting two, program planning and documentation, as well as observations such as Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2012), remained in paper-based format and were unchanged by the use of Facebook. Researcher observations confirmed this in the setting, where curriculum programming was displayed at the entrance of the centre and learning stories pasted into individual children's' portfolios (Researcher observations, Facebook setting two, observations one, two and three).

The content of collaborations on the public page in setting two tended to be focused on what had occurred throughout the session and was written as a recount based on the whole group. The content was often focused on activities the children engaged in, food that may have been served, and general day-to-day operations. As discussed by Maddison, Facebook replaced the reflective journal, whereby she communicated the daily or weekly activities undertaken by children. Posts included photos of children engaging in activities within the setting with links to the Early Years Learning Frameworks (EYLF) curriculum (outcomes) and accompanying

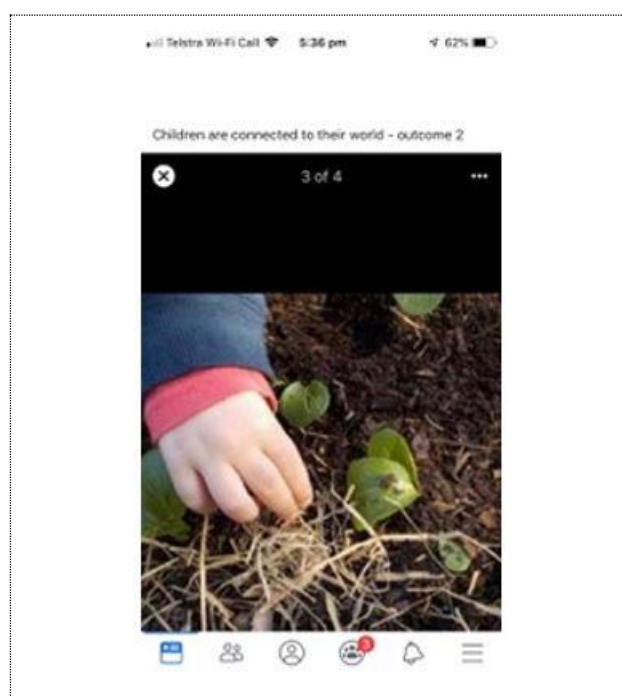
blurbs. At times, posts did include first names of children but never surnames. Maddison commented that “surnames just aren’t required and would be a breach of privacy” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two).

Facebook posts from setting two, that replaced daily reflections, tended to include statements and connections to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). For example, Figure 28 depicts both the activity and its connection to the EYLF. Including the reference to the EYLF would appear to be a way of evidencing the NQS Standard 1, Educational Program and Practice, similar to that discussed in the Storypark case (Chapter four, section 4.5.4). The inclusion of the EYLF in posts to families was explained by Maddison as a way of educating families about the frameworks in addition to having evidence for Assessment and Rating visits (see Chapter two, section 2.2.5 for information regarding Assessment and Rating). This was supported by the following statement from Maddison:

I try as much as possible to include the learning outcome that we are doing that day or week. It not only helps me in showing my documentation of how I use the outcomes but also teaches the families about what we do. I have had some families ask me what they are, so I think it is working. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two)

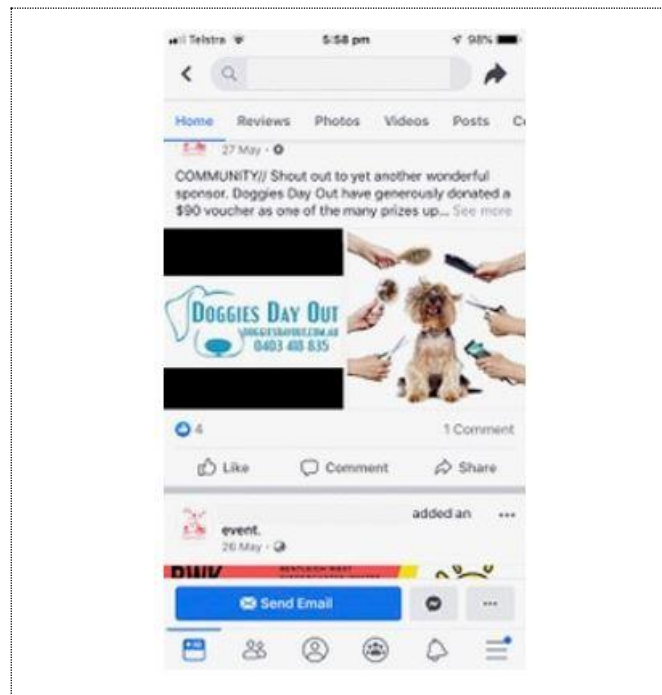
Engaging families in curriculum decision making has been discussed in detail within case two, Storypark, the implications for such are further explored in Chapter five.

**Figure 28: Post from Facebook setting 2**

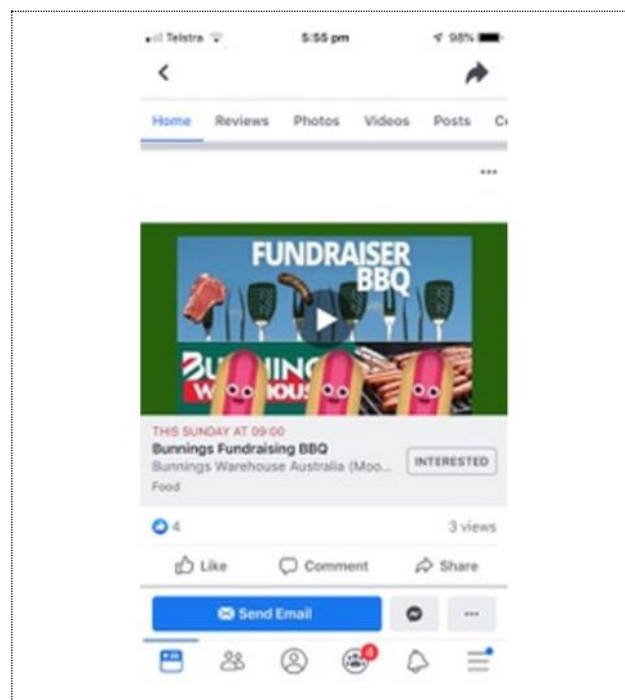


In discussing the public nature of the Facebook page, Maddison commented that she felt that having a public Facebook page allowed her to engage with the broader community in a way that she was unable to do without the use of Facebook. For example, notifications about upcoming events at the setting were frequently posted as reminders for families and broader community members to be involved. Similarly, Facebook was seen to be a way of advertising the setting and attracting new families to the centre. Maddison supported this with the following comment, “I can let our community know about upcoming open days and enrolment information, as well as other things like fundraisers” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation one). Figures 29 and 30 are Facebook posts from setting two that illustrate the community engagement and advertising on this site.

**Figure 29: Advertising and promotion on Facebook site**



**Figure 30: Fundraising post on Facebook**



Setting two's public Facebook page contained a large amount of advertising material (Figure 29) and appeared to be sponsored by a local estate agent. Many of the posts featured advertising material for local businesses. In discussions with Maddison, she felt that supporting local

business was an essential aspect of her role and was happy to have some promotional materials on the page. This was supported by the following comment from Maddison:

I don't think anyone cares if there are ads and promos on the page, you can just scroll through it. We should be supporting local businesses as sometimes we ask them for stuff for fundraising and that, so it's not an issue for our community. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation one)

The data collected and analysed included a range of content from the public Facebook page looking at; content of posts, educator's connections to curriculum, and the nature of families' collaborations. I was ethically challenged as to whether to display these as artefacts in my research. Public Facebook pages are explicitly public by nature, and families had signed permission forms for the setting to use images of their children on such sites. However, does that implicitly imply that public spaces allow for information and images to be used by anyone and for any purpose? Where data can be collected from; personal information that can be accessed without site membership, this data can be considered as the public domain (Stevens et al., 2015). However, while contributors may post to public spaces, they are unaware that these posts will be used for research purposes, therefore, raising ethical issues of informed consent to use information. It is for that reason that in this research, only images of experiences and no photos of children were used.

#### **Private Facebook pages – Settings one and three**

Setting one and setting three both used private Facebook pages. Private Facebook pages can only be viewed by invited and approved members of that group. As previously discussed, settings one and three required families to sign informed consent, including the use of Facebook. Although setting one and setting three used private Facebook pages, they are

discussed separately as the ways in which they used their private page to collaborate with families differed.

Setting one used a private Facebook page to extend the collaborative practices already in existence. Vanna, the Bachelor qualified educator, tended to take the lead on posting content, whereas Natalie was primarily responsible for capturing photos. Posts were generally based on disseminating information such as newsletters, notices and reminders. Photos of children were posted with narratives around activities and daily experiences and tended to be in the form of a recount. The content was visible to all families who were members (refer to Chapter three, section 3.9.2 for Facebook settings) and was of a general nature, not individualised. Vanna indicated that content pertinent to an individual child's learning or development was not something posted on Facebook and that this was done through other channels such as parent interviews. This was supported by the following comments from Vanna:

I use Facebook as an add on. It helps me connect with the parents I don't generally see much. I send out reminders of events, general things like remember sun hats, and post photos of things we do. Like, last week we went on a walk to the library, I posted photos of that so that parents could see their children out and about. (Vanna, Facebook setting one, interview one)

Setting three used a private Facebook page to collaborate with families and indicated that many of their existing practices had been replaced by the use of Facebook. Elly, the Bachelor qualified educator, tended to take the lead on Facebook use, with Karen contributing to a lesser level. Elly commented that Facebook had replaced existing practices such as newsletters, daily reflections and the sharing of observations with families. Individual observations were completed in paper-based formats and pasted into children's portfolios, however Elly indicated that observations were also done using Facebook. The Facebook posts were not printed but

were seen as a way to share observations with families who may not access the portfolios. This was supported by the following statement from Elly:

I still do observations the old way [paper-based] and then we print them and paste them into portfolios, I think we have to do that don't we? ... I also use Facebook to do my observations. If I see something interesting, then I will take a photo and write the observation and post that. I think that families look at Facebook more than they look at the portfolios. I hardly see anyone look at our portfolios anymore ... and Facebook is instant, I can post it and families can see it. (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one)

Facebook posts in this setting tended to provide information based on recounts of activities and discussed learning in terms of the whole group. Educators would post content regarding individual or small groups of children which were then visible to all members of the private group. Elly also used the private messaging (PM) function which allowed her to have private conversations with individual families. Private messaging was used to communicate directly with families regarding their individual children. Elly indicated that she used private messaging when sharing information about a specific child, for example: "I might PM a family to let them know the child was upset about something, or that they had a great day. I might use it to ask a question or answer their question" (Elly, Facebook setting three, interview one). In discussions with Elly about this, she reported that using private messaging was ensuring confidentiality and meeting professional and ethical standards. Posts that went to all members of the group were generally recounts of events and everyday information about the program, while private messaging was individualised.

In discussions with Elly and Karen it became apparent that the intent of posts was to inform parents about what learning was taking place, and to document the learning in order to meet

the requirements of the Quality Area One – Educational Program and Practice, under the NQS (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). Although Elly used a paper-based format for program planning, she also indicated that Facebook assisted with evidencing the curriculum planning. This was confirmed during researcher observations in the setting when the program planning was displayed for families at the entrance of the centre (Researcher observations, Facebook setting three, observations one, two and three). Throughout the Facebook posts made by Elly, curriculum content (such as children's interests in the topic of storms and hail) would also be identified and terms such as outcomes would accompany images of children engaging in playing in the rain (such as in the case of Figure 28 p. 244). Elly indicated that by posting images of children and showing the connections to the EYLF outcomes parents would realise the importance of the early childhood curriculum and educators’ work. This was supported by the following comments from Elly, “I show families the EYLF, they need to know how important it is. I want them to know that it doesn’t all start when they [children] get to school, we do important things here too” (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two).

Furthermore, Elly commented that by including curriculum connections to the EYLF in posts, they were meeting both Quality Area 1 – Educational Program and Practice, and Quality Area 6 – Collaborative Partnerships with Families under the NQS (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). When questioned about this Elly provided the following insight:

If I Facebook what I normally put in their portfolio, say for like a learning story, then I am meeting my requirements for individual documentation for the assessment and ratings visit and I am sharing it with the parents so I am meeting that one too ... it makes it easier to show how I am doing it, I just have to keep a list of all the children so I don’t forget one. (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two)

In relation to curriculum co-contribution Elly mentioned that she finds families are reluctant to contribute, for example, “I try to get families’ input, but it just doesn’t happen. I think Facebook is probably less threatening for some families, easier to just post a comment and do it that way” (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two). As indicated, Elly commented that by posting on Facebook it was one way of making curriculum visible for families in a bid that they would feel confident to contribute. By posting images of their child engaging in play Elly believed that families may be more comfortable to contribute to the curriculum decisions of the program. However, Elly mentioned that the majority of posts attract only likes from parents or one- or two-word comments mainly referring to any images posted. In discussion with Elly it was unclear how posting photos of children may elicit a better response to co-curriculum decision making. The nature of communication being one-sided is further discussed in the following section.

#### **4.5.5 Inbound and outbound communication**

Through interviews and observations of the three settings using both public and private Facebook pages, it was noted that the majority of communication from educators’ posts was outbound and the responses from families were generally of a simple nature with a like or one-/two-word statement. All three settings indicated that the intent of the posts was to enhance collaborative partnerships with families via the process of keeping the families informed about what was going on in their children’s learning, and hence involving families in the co-contribution of the curriculum.

According to Elly in setting three, the nature of the responses from families were based around comments on the photos or affirmation of the activities posted. For example, Elly commented that:

I don't really get much back from families, the occasional like. If I put up photos with small groups or individual children I tend to get those families responding with a like or good, or looks fun ... I think that photos definitely get families more engaged and probably more likely to respond. (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation three)

Similarly, Vanna stated that "families don't really say much back. I always get something, but it is usually only a like or one word" (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation two). There appeared to be no difference in the one-sided nature of communications between public or private Facebook pages. All educators who took part in this research commented that there was limited response from families, and limited co-curriculum collaboration. There was no evidence to suggest that posts increased collaboration on curriculum decision making. However, what was not questioned by educators in this research, was whether in fact, families wanted to be part of the collaboration process. Generally speaking, families that took part in this research indicated that they valued early childhood education, yet did not really want to be part of curriculum and administrative requirements. For example, as discussed by the Virgato family, "I really don't care what he does, as long as he is happy – enough with the notifications" (Virgato family, Storypark, observation three). This would affirm suggestions by Hadley (2014) (Chapter two, section 2.3.4) who asserts that educators and families often do not hold a shared understanding of collaborative partnerships, and that the diverse needs of families must be a consideration if authentic collaboration is to take place. Family perspectives across all three case studies are further discussed in Chapter four, section 4.6, and the implications for such in Chapter five.

#### **4.5.6 Privacy and ownership**

This issue of privacy settings and the use of Facebook feature heavily in current research (Debatin et al., 2009; Jones & Soltren, 2005). Although five of the six educators who took part

in this Facebook case study discussed privacy as an important consideration when using social media with families there was little evidence of guiding policy in place. Throughout this case study educators and families alike mentioned privacy when discussing the use of Facebook, for example, Vanna commented, “we make sure that we have signed consent and use a private page” (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation two). Similarly, Maddison indicated that “we would never use surnames in posts” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two). Conversations beyond informed consent and identifying individual children using full names were limited. Furthermore, when educators were asked about policy documents or practices in place regarding privacy and the use of Facebook, it was established that limited guiding policy or practice was in existence.

The issue of public and private Facebook sites was discussed with all educators, with settings one and three using private pages and therefore feeling more comfortable and secure in the knowledge that only approved members could view or post content. For example, Elly commented “we make sure that our page is secure by only having approved families. It is not like everyone can see it, only our families” (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two). On both public and private Facebook pages there are permissions that can be set that alter who can post, however, all educators who took part in this case study were unaware of what privacy settings were in place, if any, on the pages they posted to. There appeared to be no checks or guidelines in place for those who created posts, or guides in terms of the content posted on any of the Facebook pages. In some instances, parent committees of management or fundraising committees had themselves developed an informal code of conduct to guide content of posts. Setting three was the only setting that indicated that they developed a social media policy, however they were unable to provide a copy due to internet issues, and educators’ knowledge of the content of the document appeared limited.

Of particular interest was setting two that used a public Facebook page. Public Facebook pages essentially mean that anyone can view the content and post comments, and that members do not need to be approved. Maddison and Maria used a public Facebook page and did not seem particularly concerned that anyone could view or post content, in fact Maddison could not confirm the membership of the group. This was supported by the following comments from Maddison:

We have around seventy followers and the majority are our families, but when I have looked through we have about seven or eight that we have no idea who they are. We also have six or seven past families, people who wanted to stay in touch with the kinder. I think it's good that people can see what we do, we are showing them the importance of kindergarten. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two)

It appeared that privacy was not of concern to Maddison or Maria. Although they did mention that they excluded children's surnames from posts, images of children accompanied with first names and locations were all shared publicly. Families' perceptions are discussed in detail in Chapter four, section 4.6, however during researcher observations in the setting the Reilly family indicated that they were not overly concerned about the use of Facebook and privacy. This was supported by the following comment from the Reilly family during researcher observations in the setting, "I'm not worried about Facebook, it is everywhere now, everyone has it. Just because someone can see a picture of ... [child] doesn't mean anything, who really cares these days?" (Reilly family, Facebook setting three, observation three).

The ownership of images of children was a concern raised by both educators and parents in all settings. However, the distribution of images, such as in the case of posts on Facebook, was not mentioned and therefore did not appear to be a concern. Elly, the educator from setting three, commented that she often attempted to post photos of children where faces could not be

identified, but that this was not always possible. In questioning her further about this she relayed that her concerns were centred around the ownership of images posted on Facebook, and how these may be used by Facebook. For example:

I try not to use photos where the children's faces are clear, but that is hard. It's only families on our page so I'm not really worried, but you keep hearing things about Facebook owning the photos and then using them however they like. (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation three)

As indicated by Vanna, Maddison and Elly, the educators felt that as parents had signed publicity disclosure or informed consent documents allowing photos of children to be used, this therefore covered all communications. Elly and the Reilly family (also at setting three), indicated that they were unsure of who owned the content posted on Facebook, however it did not appear to be a consideration when making posts or signing permission to release publicity disclosure forms.

#### **4.5.7 Considerations of being Facebook friends with families**

Regardless of whether the educational setting has a public or private Facebook page for its collaboration with families, accepting families as Facebook friends often means that families have access to educators' personal Facebook posts. There are restrictions that a Facebook user can place on who sees the content that they post, yet users must enact these privacy settings for restrictions to be placed on who sees content. Educators in settings two and three reported that they were Facebook friends with some of the families enrolled in the centre. When asked about being Facebook friends with families Maddison and Elly both confirmed that they were friends

with a range of families, and this was generally due to accepting friend request<sup>23</sup> from families. Maddison and Elly confirmed that there were no set criteria by which they determined who would be a Facebook friend. This was explained by Elly who commented that, “I am friends with maybe half of the families here, if they send a friend request then I accept it. It would be weird to ignore it, I see them every day” (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two). Similarly, Maddison commented that she was Facebook friends with some families and that this was also determined by which families sent friend requests, “I don’t know how many [families] I’m friends with. If a friend request pops up and I know who they are then I accept them” (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two). Juxtaposing this was Vanna in Facebook setting one who indicated that she felt that having families as Facebook friends was unprofessional and had concerns over professional identity and personal disclosure. When questioned further about this Vanna commented that:

I don’t think having families as my friends on Facebook is a good idea. I know that some people do it, but it is not for me. Everyone makes their own decisions. I rarely use Facebook myself, but I don’t want families seeing everything. It isn’t professional. I am their kindergarten teacher, why would they need to see what I am doing on the weekend, or who my friends are? I don’t want to see their personal stuff either. (Vanna, Facebook setting one, observation two)

As the data indicated, there was an increase in the number of overall communications when families used the private messaging function to communicate with educators. Outside the bounds of this study was the detailed investigation of educators’ relationship with families and

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<sup>23</sup> A friend request means requesting access to a user’s online activity. According to Facebook, adding a friend means you may see each other’s activity in News Feed, Stories and Photos

the impact of Facebook friends on types and frequency of communication, however research that investigates the complexities of Facebook friends would prove useful in determining the ways in which Facebook impacts educators' collaborations, workload and professional identity.

#### **4.5.8 The possibilities of Third Space and quality within the case**

The use of Facebook to collaborate with families did afford the opportunity for new possibilities to emerge in the third space that were centred around accessibility to communications. Educators and families reported that Facebook allowed for an increase in frequency, and access to communications. Facebook positioned educators as being more available for parents to message, even though that included after-hours communications. Families and educators alike reported that they saw Facebook as an enabler of communication in terms of speed of communication and availability.

The types of communication were similar across all three Facebook settings, however the use of private messaging did tend to invite more after-hours communications. Accessibility to communications increased regardless of the type of Facebook account used (public or private page), however it was noted that educators using private messaging with families saw an increase in the overall number of interactions. Interestingly, this was not perceived as a negative by educators using Facebook, instead they reported this as being "part of the job" (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation one). The third space allowed for discussion on educators' workload and professional identity to emerge, therefore shaping the possibilities and implications of social media use in collaborative partnerships more broadly.

The use of Facebook through the theoretical lens of Third Space may allow for an increase in communication and be perceived as being immediate, however the implications on educators' workloads and professional identities must also be considered. Similar to that of the Storypark

case, Facebook did not appear to increase curriculum collaborations, with the majority of families not responding or responding in a simplistic way. Therefore, although the use of the third space did allow new opportunities to emerge, it also highlighted educators' perceptions on the failure of families to contribute to curriculum decisions.

#### **4.5.9 Case three through a quality lens**

Consistent with the findings from case study one (email), and case study two (Storypark), quality is dependent upon the intent of the collaborations, and from whose perspective it is examined. In case study three, the different uses of Facebook, there were similarities in use not affected by public or private Facebook pages. From the perspective of educators such as Maddison and Elly, Facebook offered quality as they were able to evidence their practice and compliance under the National Quality Standards (NQS). For example, Maddison and Elly indicated that their collaborations were centred around sharing curriculum decisions with families via Facebook in an attempt to meet the NQS; sharing and seeking curriculum decision making. Yet families, more broadly through the family survey, stated that they did not want to be part of curriculum decision making and felt overwhelmed by the number of posts they received. When practices that emerge in the third space do not align with the stakeholder's inherent requirements of the partnerships, the potential for a decline in collaborative partnerships may be the new possibility.

#### **4.5.10 Summary of case three – collaborative practice through Facebook**

The use of Facebook in the third space appeared to present some complex challenges around the issues of public versus private; whether to use private messaging with parents and adding parents as Facebook friends. Generally, the use of Facebook was perceived to add value to collaborative practice by increasing the access and immediacy of communication. However, the driving factors behind the ways in which educators and families used Facebook differed.

Educators tended to use Facebook as a form of evidencing compliance, whereas families used Facebook as a direct line of communication, and often for trivial issues not related to education, such as lost jumpers. The use of private messaging added to the number of overall interactions and invited interactions that were less focused on education. The opportunities that educators and families felt were new possibilities were centred around ease of access and immediacy of access. It is questionable, though, whether being able to contact an educator or parent quickly, or at whatever time of the day you like, is actually a new possibility in terms of authentic collaboration or simply something afforded by the functionality of social media. The implications surrounding the use of Facebook in both public, private and private messaging would benefit from further investigation.

#### **4.6 Family perspectives**

There were a total of sixteen families across all case study sites that responded to the collaborative practice survey for families (Appendix B). Although this is a small sample size and does not assume to suggest statistical significance, the responses did provide some interesting insights into the nature of collaborative practices. In addition to this, researcher observations and immersion in each of the settings did enable some quality discussions to occur between families and the researcher. There were ten families that participated in conversations during researcher observations. All participants were female. It is unknown if these ten were inclusive of the sixteen total who completed the electronic family survey as the survey guaranteed anonymity (refer to Chapter three section 3.11 for participant information). The descriptive statistics data obtained through the family survey, alongside the thematic analysis from the researcher observations and interactions with families in the setting are discussed concurrently to provide a comprehensive narrative of families' experiences. The perspectives of families are discussed broadly across all three cases – email, Storypark and Facebook – as

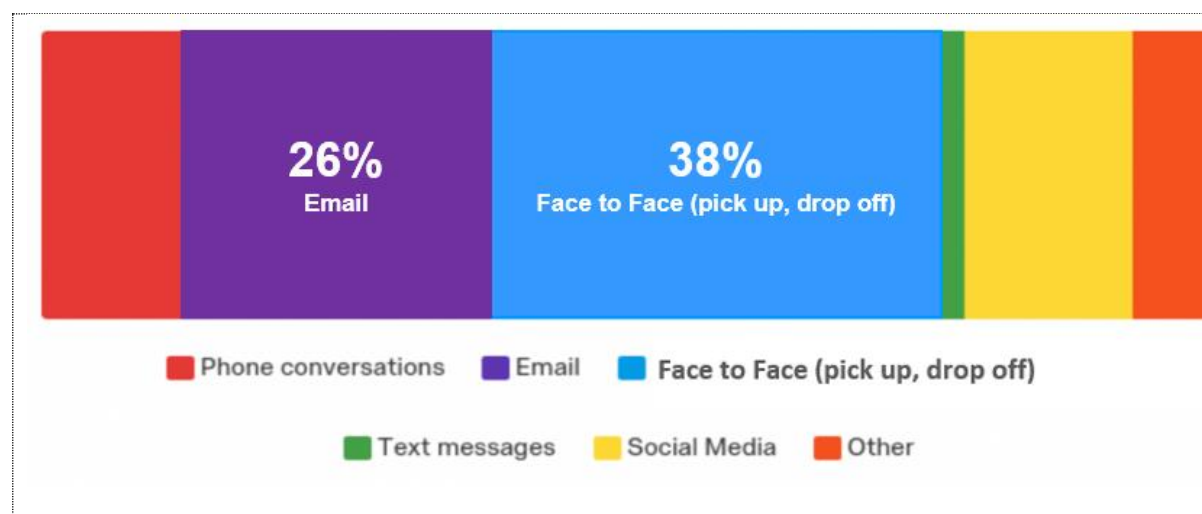
they share commonalities, however, vignettes from individual families add value to each of the cases individually.

The invitation to participate in the research was disseminated to families by the educators within each setting. As there were limited responses with a total of sixteen families answering the survey, perhaps a more anonymous approach would have allowed families a higher level of participation, or perhaps it is indicative of a commonly held theory that families are now busier than ever.

From surveys and interactions with families all indicated that they felt that collaborative practice was important in early childhood and an important factor for their family. The multiple ways in which families collaborated with the ECEC setting (Question 2) is quantified (across all three case studies) in Figure 31 and Table 13 with 38 per cent (n=16) interacting via traditional face-to-face mode, 26 per cent (n=11) via email and 14 per cent (n=6) via social media.

**Figure 31: Current methods of collaborative practice within setting**

(Question 2)



**Table 13: Current methods of collaborative practice within setting**

(Question 2)

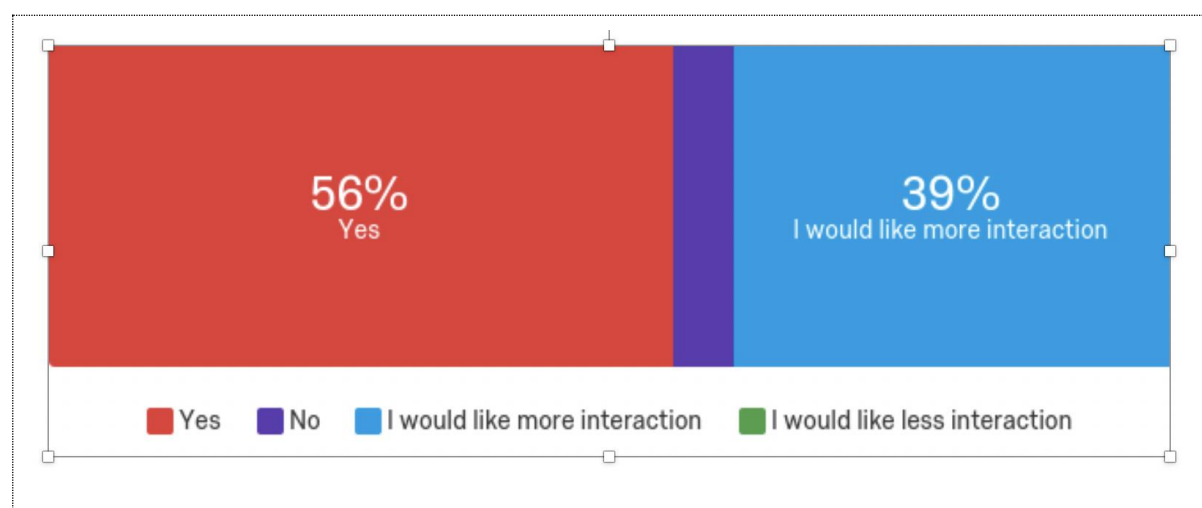
| # | Answer                           | %      | Count |
|---|----------------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Phone conversations              | 11.90% | 5     |
| 2 | Email                            | 26.19% | 11    |
| 3 | Face to Face (pick up, drop off) | 38.10% | 16    |
| 4 | Text messages                    | 2.38%  | 1     |
| 5 | Social Media                     | 14.29% | 6     |
| 6 | Other                            | 7.14%  | 3     |
|   | Total                            | 100%   | 42    |

In response to question 3, which determined overall satisfaction with amount of collaboration, fifty-six (n=10) per cent of families felt that they wanted more opportunities for collaboration while 39 per cent (n=7) indicated that they were happy with the current level of communication (Figure 32 and Table 14). From researcher observations across all settings this was supported by the following comments from families, “I’m fairly happy with how ... [educator’s name] communicates with us. I like being able to talk when I do pick up, but it is a busy time. I can always make a time for a meeting if I need to” (Edwards family, email, observation two).

Similarly, from the Virgato family, “It is sometimes tricky to get a chance to speak in the morning, there are mums and kids everywhere. I would like more opportunities to communicate in person” (Virgato family, Storypark, observation three).

**Figure 32: Parents’ satisfaction with current levels of collaboration**

(Question 3)



**Table 14: Parents’ satisfaction with current levels of collaboration**

(Question 3)

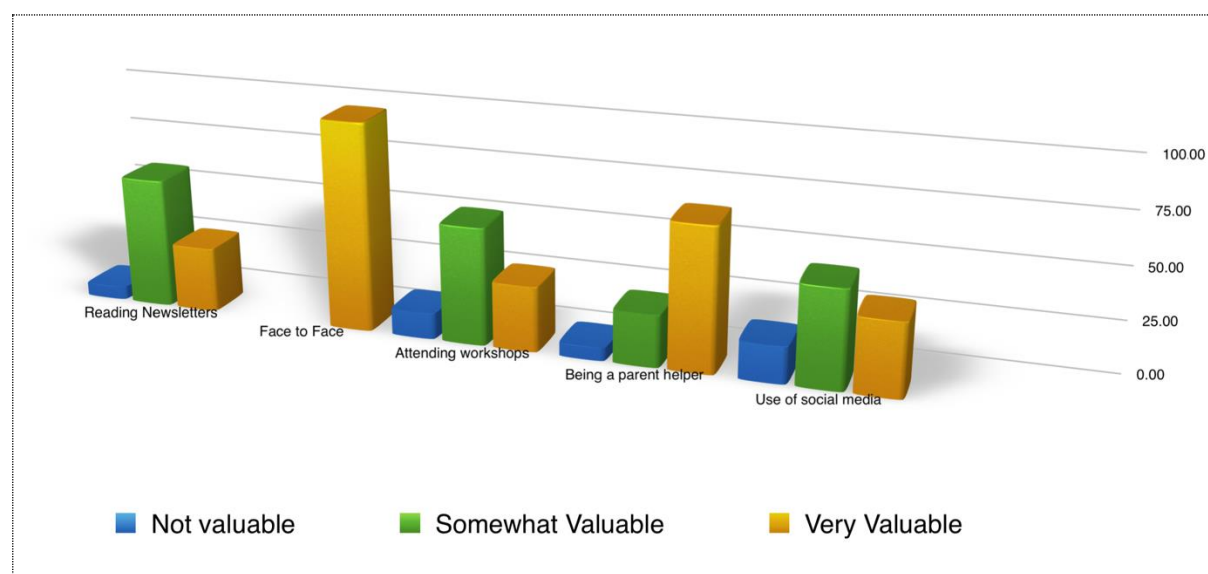
| # | Answer                        | %      | Count |
|---|-------------------------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Yes                           | 55.56% | 10    |
| 2 | No                            | 5.56%  | 1     |
| 3 | I would like more interaction | 38.89% | 7     |
| 4 | I would like less interaction | 0.00%  | 0     |
|   | Total                         | 100%   | 18    |

Question six employed the Likert (1932) scale and asked families to rank how useful they found a range of communication methods from: not valuable, somewhat valuable and very valuable. The communication categories ranged from traditional methods to more recent forms of communication and included; newsletters, face-to-face conversations, working bees, assisting as a parent helper and social media. Figure 33 provides an overview of the responses

generated, whereas Table 15 provides the quantitative break down of numbers. It was interesting to note that 100 per cent (n=16) of families felt that face-to-face interactions were very valuable, therefore indicating this as the most popular means of communication. The response to the use of social media to communicate was varied with 18 per cent (n=3) indicating it was not valuable, 47 per cent (n=8) indicating it was somewhat valuable, and 35 per cent (n=6) indicating it was very valuable.

Twenty five per cent (n=4) of families indicated that they would prefer more face-to-face communication at transition times rather than more posts. This was supported by the following comments from the Virgato family, “I prefer to speak to an actual person than read a notification online” (Virgato family, Storypark, observation three). These findings suggest that there is a mixed feeling about the use of social media to communicate; this was further supported by the qualitative comments made by the Edwards family, “ ... [social media] is unnecessary and time consuming, prefer face-to- face” (Edwards family, Facebook setting one, observation three).

**Figure 33: Families’ perceptions of the different methods of collaborating**  
(Question 6)



**Table 15: Families’ perceptions of the different methods of collaborating**

(Question 6)

| # | Question                                 | Not<br>valuable |   | Somewhat<br>Valuable |    | Very<br>Valuable |    | Total |
|---|------------------------------------------|-----------------|---|----------------------|----|------------------|----|-------|
| 1 | Reading Newsletters                      | 6.25%           | 1 | 62.50%               | 10 | 31.25%           | 5  | 16    |
| 2 | Face to Face conversations               | 0.00%           | 0 | 0.00%                | 0  | 100.00%          | 16 | 16    |
| 3 | Attending working bees                   | 12.50%          | 2 | 56.25%               | 9  | 31.25%           | 5  | 16    |
|   | Being a parent or special helper         | 6.25%           | 1 | 25.00%               | 4  | 68.75%           | 11 | 16    |
|   | Use of of social media to<br>communicate | 17.65%          | 3 | 47.06%               | 8  | 35.29%           | 6  | 17    |

During researcher observations in the setting, families were asked about the content of collaborations. All ten families who participated in conversations indicated that they valued collaborations that kept them informed and offered information about the daily activities their child had participated in. Generally, families indicated that they valued collaboration that allowed them to communicate more effectively with their children about what they undertook in their day at childcare/kindergarten, as well as providing a snapshot of how the child was coping and progressing in care. For example, from interactions with the Edwards family, “I like that ... [educator’s name] emails me about what’s going on” (Edwards family, email, observation two). Similarly, from the Williams family:

Storypark shows me that they went out for a walk to the library today and then when I pick up ... [child’s name] I can ask him about it, and when we go to the library he will know what it’s all about. (Williams family, Storypark, observation three)

Furthermore, when discussing content of collaborations with families all indicated that curriculum content and knowledge of the Early Years Learning Frameworks (EYLF) was not a priority for them. Importantly, all ten families indicated that communication about curriculum was not as important as knowing if their child was happy and making friends. This was supported by the following comments from the McWhinney family:

The workers at my son's day care are great. They send me all kinds of notifications throughout the day. For me, I just want to know that he is happy, not crying and has someone to play with ... the other stuff, I don't really care about. (McWhinney family, Facebook setting three, observation three)

Similarly, from the Williams family:

I like to know what is going on. Reminders are really helpful. To be honest, I don't look at all of the other stuff with the learning ... photos are good but if it is too long, or has too much jargon, I just turn off. (Williams family, Storypark, observation three)

When further prompted about the content and use of the term 'jargon', the Williams family identified that they were referring to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) as part of the National Quality Framework (NQF). Likewise, the McWhinney family indicated that Facebook posts containing curriculum content linked to the EYLF was not something they found of value, as supported by the following comments:

Sometimes I get a bit over the indicators, I mean outcomes stuff. I just want to know he is progressing okay and is happy and can go to school next year. I like seeing what he is doing at kindergarten but don't see the need for lots of outcomes (McWhinney family, Facebook setting three, observation three).

Although limited in the number of responses, the families who took part in the surveys and interactions indicated that they did not value collaborations centred around the curriculum. Findings from educators within each of the cases listed the benefits of using social media as evidencing the EYLF, hence there was a discrepancy between how educators are using social media and what families want from the social media collaborations.

The data collected through the parent survey and observations across the three settings indicated that families' understanding of collaborative partnerships were centred around:

1. Educators communicating how their child was progressing both academically and socially
2. Educators sharing about activities in ways that enabled families to have conversations with their child
3. A trust that educators knew what they were doing, and that they would communicate any concerns
4. An expectation that educators would keep families informed, which would be done through face-to-face and online communications

In both the survey (question 11) and through observations in the setting, families were asked about potential concerns they had regarding using social media. The survey elicited only five responses to that specific question. All five indicated that they had no concerns regarding the use of social media. One respondent indicated that they felt social media such as Facebook was not secure, yet the use of Storypark did provide that level of privacy, "Not with Storypark. With other open media, yes. I'd rather keep interaction with the centre private, and with things like Facebook, you just can't" (family survey respondent).

During researcher observations in the settings, families were asked about potential concerns about using social media. Across all cases, three of the ten families who took part in conversations indicated that they had some concerns, whereas seven indicated that they had no concerns. Of the three that did list concerns, the central theme to these concerns was that of privacy and online safety. This was supported by the following comments from the McWhinney family, "...with social media I am worried about the potential for nasty comments or incorrect information" (McWhinney family, Facebook setting three, observation three).

Similarly, from the Edwards family, “I don’t want any photos of my child or her activities in any form of social media, there is no privacy” (Edwards family, Facebook setting three, observation three). Interestingly, the Edwards family, which was part of the Facebook case study in setting three and which used a public Facebook page, had signed consent for publicity disclosure, and therefore images were being used on Facebook by the educators. It was unclear from the family why they had signed consent yet stated that they were opposed to photos being posted on social media.

These findings from the family surveys and interactions within the settings would indicate that some families are concerned about the risk to privacy when collaborating via social media, yet this did not always affect signing consent forms. However, the majority of families who participated in this research showed little concern. Family perspectives are further discussed in Chapter five, implications for families (refer to Chapter 5, section 5.3.1).

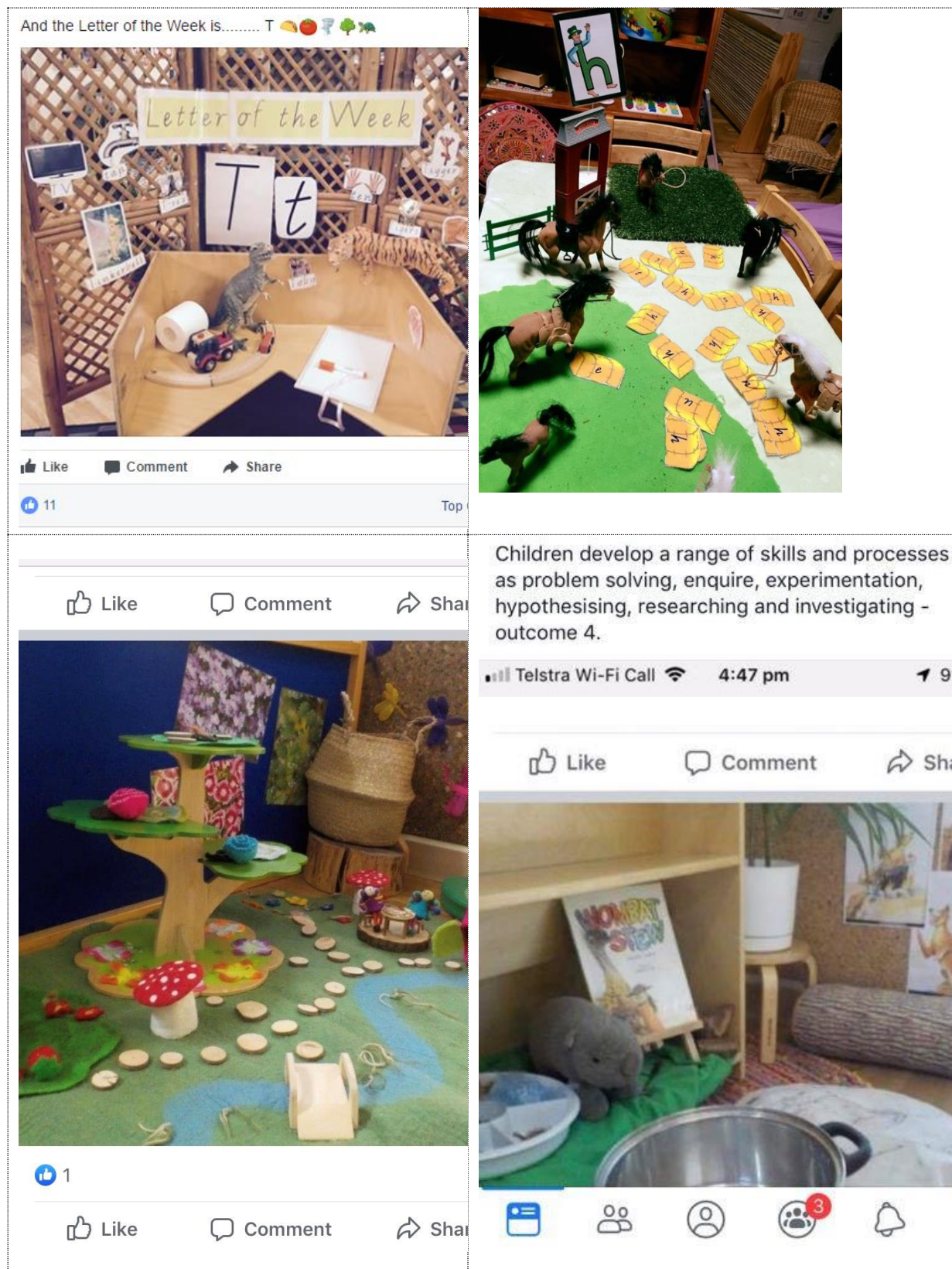
The findings have revealed a culture of compliance driven by a rigorous regime of performance measurements against the perceived nature of the NQS statements, to demonstrate and prove quality. The following section presents a discussion on the findings in light of the literature on quality.

## **4.7 The performativity of quality**

Notions of quality in ECEC are a central component to the many reforms introduced in the sector over the past two decades. The Australian National Law, Regulations and Standards establish a particular set of principles and practices that must be adhered to in the bid to achieve quality under these reforms. One aspect investigated in this research was that of collaboration in terms of participating in curriculum development. Examination of the research literature, together with the data from the educators' responses in this study, generated questions about the intent of collaborations as part of a compliance regime.

As established, research on the benefits of collaborative partnerships themselves is robust (Epstein, 2001; Francesca & Guillermo, 2012; Povey, Campbell, Willis, Haynes, Western, Bennett & Pedde, 2016). However, research regarding the benefits of families contributing to curriculum design is developing (Pushor, 2011, 2013). The initial survey, three case studies and family perspectives presented in this research provided evidence of educators consistently attempting to share and engage families in various aspects of the curriculum. The compliance requirements of documenting children's learning under the NQS and EYLF appeared to be the driver for educators in many forms of communication with families, where proving learning outcomes seemed to dominate the nature of the communication. For example, educators used communications with families as a way to document how they were meeting the EYLF outcomes rather than inviting reciprocal collaboration (Figure 34). When communication is an image of an activity with a linked EYLF outcome, families are limited in the way they can respond. Although posts such as shown in Figure 34 are examples of sharing curriculum that the child is engaging with, the ability for families to authentically engage and contribute in a meaningful educational way seems limited. It would appear that the collaborations from educators intend to prove compliance with the standards, and this pressure to evidence compliance has shaped the nature of the collaborations.

**Figure 34: Artefacts from the research**



The artefacts presented in this research highlight that educators are using collaborations as a form of evidence, without deliberate thought or opportunity for authentic collaboration. As discussed in section 4.5, where Elly indicated that she felt using the EYLF outcomes made learning visible for families, would seem to indicate that the intention for the collaboration itself is blurred and complex and families' opportunities for reciprocal collaboration has not been considered in the communication. These blurred communications between educator and family appear to be more concerned with evidencing outcomes rather than truly inviting collaborative practice. For example, the data in the cases provide examples of educators using collaborations to prove compliance, with language of outcomes in posts that are focused on demonstrating the EYLF. However, families indicated during researcher observations that they were not interested in learning outcomes and wanted collaborations to be focused on the sharing of information in ways that allowed them to stay informed and enable conversations between them and their child. In the data collected there were examples of social media posts that were clearly used as a means of evidencing outcomes. Although educators did share these artefacts as examples of collaborative practice, they also believed these to be evidencing how they were seeking co-contribution to curriculum decisions: for example:

I try as much as possible to include the learning outcome that we are doing that day or week. It not only helps me in showing my documentation of how I use the outcomes but also teaches the families about what we do. (Maddison, Facebook setting two, observation two)

Similarly, Fatima explained that "When we get an assessment and rating visit it will be all simple, everything is there. We can show our program, observations and interactions with families" (Fatima, Storypark, observation two).

The artefacts shown in Figure 34 are examples of posts sent to families that are used to both evidence and encourage collaboration in curriculum. However, posts such as these are not truly examples of collaborative practice. Rather, they are simply sharing basic information of curriculum decisions or how the educational program and practice are linked to the EYLF. How meaningful for families are links to curriculum outcomes alongside images of activities? It could be questioned whom these posts were actually intended for; are they to elicit co-contribution to curriculum from families, or are they more about educators' evidence in meeting assessment and rating compliance requirements?

The data collected in this research supports the work of Grant et al. (2018) whose research on the effects of the quality agenda on educators' work found that the requirement to meet compliance and evidence based measures had shaped the way that they work. More specifically, Grant et al. (2018) investigated the impact of the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) as a subsidiary of NQF policies on educators' work. They found that there was a marked increase in educator workload through compliance. Similar to the findings of this research study was the Grant et al. (2018) findings, whereby educators spent a large part of their time trying to gather evidence to "justify practice" (p. 520). They assert that the QIP requirement under the NQS has shaped educators' work whereby it is centred on teacher performativity and keeping quality visible. The performativity of keeping quality visible was a key theme that also emerged in this research, whereby educators were using social media posts as evidence of quality, justifying their practices to be included in the assessment and rating cycle.

The artefacts presented (such as Figure 34) demonstrate examples of how educators have used social media posts to justify practice. The following section provides a discussion on the disparity of intentions when examining the purpose of collaborating with families from both the views of educators evidencing compliance and meeting the diverse needs of families.

### **4.7.1 Quality and the disparity in collaborations**

Statements made by educators and families in this research highlight the disparity between the intentions of educators, and expectations of families, of what the collaborative partnership entails. In other words; educators are using the partnerships and social media as evidence of compliance, whereas families want a partnership based on more generalised information that keeps them informed on their child's progress. This is further supported by the findings of Willis and Exley (2018), whose study revealed that although collaboration between educators and families was valued, collaboration was largely centred around information sharing that then enabled families to extend the activities and commensurate learning outcomes at home. Furthermore, Willis and Exley's (2018) research examined the enablers and inhibitors of social media and found that parents' reasons for engaging with educators through social media were: to strengthen existing positive parent–teacher relationships, to keep informed of happenings in the classroom, to engage with their child in an online forum. It was interesting to note that Willis and Exley's (2018) research did not appear to evidence co-curriculum development as an important factor for parents when discussing the intentions of the collaborations. However, their research was located in primary school settings and was therefore not directed by the requirement of meeting NQS 6 or the EYLF. The findings by Willis and Exley (2018) further support the data in this study that indicates that families and educators do not hold a shared understanding of collaborative partnerships.

The findings of this research highlighted that families and educators have differing intentions regarding the exact nature of the collaborations, and that families desire from collaborations to understand what their child is doing during the day. Families have indicated that they do not necessarily want to be part of the planning of activities, and to decide learning outcomes, and that they do not seek to elaborate on the National Quality Standards. Furthermore, the findings in this study are similarly supported by the research of Sunderland and Speden (2017) whose

study on the use of Storypark in a New Zealand ECEC service found that there was limited reciprocity in who was posting communications, with educators being the predominant contributor. The data collected through interviews, observations and examination of artefacts in this research highlights similarities, such as one-sided communications lacking reciprocity. Similarly, the families interviewed in the Sunderland and Speden (2017) study reported the main benefit of Storypark as the affordance of understanding day-to-day activities their child had undertaken. Likewise, the families who took part in this research also revealed that they preferred communications that enabled conversations to be had with their child.

In the analysis of the data from this research, one implication to be considered was that of educators' intentions in the collaborations (Figure 28, p.244). We might ask, 'What was the educator's intent for the collaboration?' Was it to communicate what the children are learning (therefore keeping families informed and strengthening families' ability to connect with the child about their day), or was it to elicit a contribution to the curriculum itself? (therefore, meeting NQS 6 and providing evidence of quality in ratings and assessment judgment). The data presented in this research would indicate that educators' collaborations are centred around meeting compliance requirements of mandated policy documents. In the analysis of this research, a question arose – When collaborations are centred around outcomes of policy documents, what are the expected responses from families? Posts that show images of the letter of the week or alphabet activities do not provide any call for families to participate in curriculum building, rather they showcase or provide evidence of experiences.

Similarly, a study by Fan and Yost (2019) explored the potential of social media for communication in preschool settings. They confirmed that there are indeed opportunities that social media may afford in terms of collaborations with parents and that these should be considered in a time when "traditional ways of communicating are becoming inadequate due to parents' and families' busy schedule" (Fan & Yost, 2019, p. 132). Although collaborations

in terms of co-curriculum design were not the direct focus of their research, an excerpt from a participant highlights the discrepancy between what families and educators want out of the communications themselves. They write:

... he [son] comes home and he's learning all this crazy stuff. He is hopping on one foot from side to side and learning about French notations. I don't know any of that because I only get eight pages of their [learning] outcomes and I don't know what he's actually learning and I'd love to know (participant from research as cited in (Fan & Yost, 2019, p. 136).

The nature of the collaborations in Figure 28 (p. 244) (Facebook, setting three), and examples similar to them, do not allow for families to engage in meaningful, reciprocal co-design interactions with educators or their children. If these types of posts are being used as the basis of collaborative partnerships, it is unclear how they meet the needs of children or families in terms of co-design. Importantly then, the vernacular of this compliance culture and performativity is seen to influence and shape educators' collaborations with families as they attempt to use communications and social media as evidence of meeting the NQS. With the NQS being accepted as the measure of quality of ECEC this burden of proof in meeting the NQS shifts and repositions the intent of interactions and collaborations between educators and families. If collaborations are used as a measure of quality, whose notion of quality is actually being assessed? Where is the common ground with regard to the interpretations of the terms being used? Posts depicting activities linked to outcomes limit how families can respond, therefore, are families seeing these posts and the use of social media as quality in ECEC? Perhaps it may not simply be a case of associating lack of collaboration to busy families, but quite frankly that families do not seem to be interested in collaborating in the same way that educators feel that they need to, and as required by the NQS.

Chapter two, section 2.4.5, presented a discussion on the complex nature of collaborative partnerships and referred to partnerships as being ‘rhizomatic’. A rhizomatic structure can be explained as a complex connection of links, or a diverse web-like structure that extends in all directions (Deleuze et al., 2013). Therefore, the inability to define and articulate quality and the differing definitions of quality were referred to as rhizomatic (Deleuze et al., 2013; Logan & Sumsion, 2010). It could also be said that the concept of collaborative practice through social media, and its intention, is also a rhizome. According to the literature and findings within this case study, educators’ and families’ understandings of, and expectations from, collaborations appear fundamentally different.

#### **4.7.2 Quality and families – going beyond sharing**

Outside the scope of this study was the investigation of families’ understandings of quality. Although this research did not interrogate the understandings of quality from the perspective of families, it did begin to unpack families’ understandings about the nature and scope of collaborative practices. An important aspect of this research was the need to further investigate collaborative practice with families in the context of what they view as being fundamental, and a stated need for the level of involvement in terms of collaborative practice and curriculum collaboration. It would appear that in this research, families do not share the same expectations of collaboration and that, in fact, many families’ desire to collaborate is based solely on better engaging with their child rather than contributing to the education design.

Aligning educators’ and families’ perceptions of collaborative practice, taking into consideration the reality of what families actually want from the collaborations, appears to be problematic. Educators appeared to use collaborations with families as proof of compliance in their interpretation of the NQS and its association with high quality. However, the nature of the collaborations appears to be changing since the focus of educators would seem to be on

demonstrations of quality being manifested in postings about how the activity meets the outcomes. In contrast, parents appear to be looking for something different in communication with regard to how their children are progressing. Families' feedback has indicated that they want collaborations to be centred around a few key questions: Is my child happy? What did my child do today? (to allow for meaningful conversations), and Is my child progressing normally? Although families did not indicate that they were not receiving this information from educators, they did comment that communications focused on outcomes was not meaningful. Continual posts about learning outcomes did not appear to meet the needs of families, as highlighted through the parents' perspectives in section 4.6. In fact, many might be unaware of the requirements for collaboration under the National Quality Standards. The data indicates that there appeared to be a misalignment of the nature of collaboration between the needs of educators and families that has ultimately been driven by the pressure to comply with the NQS by educators.

Limited in the research literature is work on families' perspectives on co-contribution. Delving deeper into what families understand as curriculum co-contribution and their attitude and willingness toward co-contribution requires further investigation. The data collected in this research, through surveys and interactions with families across all three case sites, indicated that families do not necessarily want to contribute to curriculum decisions. Families indicated that they appreciated fast and responsive communication with services at a time that was convenient to them; "I love that I can send a message about something he has lost, or something that I need and that the teacher gets back to me almost instantly" (Nguyen family, Storypark). It would appear that, for families, the desire for information sharing rather than collaboration is the driver for the communications themselves. It is also interesting to note that some families appear to have expectations around educators being available to answer communications at any time that is convenient to them, for example, after traditional working hours. Many of the

families who reported that social media was an enabler of collaborative practice indicated that they found value in the use of social media as it allowed them to communicate with educators after hours. These communications generally were not concerned with curriculum collaboration, but rather practical everyday issues. The expectation that educators are available to families after hours is problematic on a range of fronts.

Families identified the value of social media in facilitating connections between home and the education setting, enabling conversations between children and families on what has occurred during the day. Families indicated that they wanted to be able to discuss with the child what they did at the centre and what they enjoyed that day – a means of enabling a conversation and being virtually present in the child's day.

This data supports the findings of McFadden and Thomas (2016) whose study revealed that when parents access online platforms, 88 per cent of them were predominantly looking for photos of their child and a way to engage. In fact, the notion of co-contribution to curriculum was viewed in a completely different context by many families who believed that curriculum decisions were the educator's role and that they did not want to be involved in this. Moreover, as discussed, some families in this research indicated that they felt bombarded with constant posts about curriculum and content that was not relevant to them, refer to section 4.6.

Feedback from families about not wanting to be involved in educators' work is directly opposed to concepts in the NQS that require educators to collaborate with families. The findings of this research indicate that families do not necessarily want to be involved in the same ways that educators are expecting and that these expectations of collaboration are, at times, becoming problematic for families. It could be proposed that the frequency and access of communication that is enabled by using social media could actually be further fuelling unwanted communications. For example, traditional forms of collaboration would not have

afforded three or four opportunities in a working day for educators to communicate with families. However, with the use of social media, educators can now quickly post and message families multiple times throughout a working day.

Further to this was the notion of parent guilt and pressure to respond to posts which was raised by families who felt that educators would consider them lesser parents for not regularly contributing to online conversations; “I look like a bad parent if I don’t respond or make a comment ... but I don’t have time ... [educators name] will think I am a bad parent if I don’t respond” (Virgato family, Storypark, observation three). Similarly, “I like that I can see stuff that she is doing during the day, but I sometimes just hit like so I can get back to work and still look like I am part of it” (Williams family, Storypark, observation three).

In many social media applications statistics tracking is enabled, therefore allowing educators to view families' activity. In discussion with educators about how they decide what to post and where to post, educators commented that their knowledge of individual families’ attitudes and engagement informs these decisions. According to educators in case study two, it is the functionality of Storypark that allows educators to access statistical information on families’ access; educators can see when, how often and for how long families access the Storypark app; “I know which families will and won't read that ... Although families are on their phones all the time, it doesn't mean that they are on Storypark ...” (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation two). With tracking statistics enabled in many social media applications, the potential to negatively impact collaborative partnerships between families and settings is problematic. If any party negatively views the other based on their participation in the application, this has the potential of creating barriers rather than facilitating collaborative practice.

Surprisingly, what was interesting is that both educators and families responded that the benefits of using social media to collaborate were grounded in frequency and ease of access.

Being able to communicate quickly and at a time that was suitable for their busy schedules was rated highly with both parties. The content of the collaborations was what differentiated them. Families tended to want photos (rather than collaborations) of their children engaged in learning, as well as information that allowed them to be virtually present in the child's day so that this facilitated conversations with the child after the care had finished and they were home. Educators tended to use the collaborations to share learning and attempt to elicit shared curriculum decisions (motivated by a compliance culture), which was not a priority held by families.

Consequently, it was evident that both educators and families felt pressure in maintaining collaborative partnerships. Educators felt pressure to share curriculum decisions and respond to families in a timely manner, while families felt pressure to simply respond and be seen as being an active and involved parent. When the two sides of a partnership hold different conceptual understandings about the agenda and nature of the collaborations, and both feel the pressure to perform (compliance quality or good parent), we need to ask: are these genuinely assisting in building quality in early childhood programs?

This research has found that there is an apparent disparity between educators' and families' understandings of collaborative practice that have the potential to be problematic in achieving quality for all stakeholders. Understanding the implications of such disparity for families, educators and education more broadly is discussed in the following section.

#### **4.7.3 Quality, compliance and professional identity**

This section locates the research findings from this project in the context of the research literature on the changing nature of educators' work. The education reforms mandated by Australian governments impact on the way in which educators undertake their roles, with many participants in this research feeling that compliance takes them away from the most relevant

and important aspects of teaching. Therefore, the imposed pressure of meeting mandated measures of quality may not hold true to educators' pedagogical beliefs, and does not allow for varied ways of teaching. Educators from the sector who took part in this research have commented that the administrative pressure to comply decreases the amount of time spent interacting and working with the children, for example, "(I) Feel a greater demand for i's dotted and t's crossed and with greater emphasis on this overspending quality time learning with the children" (Educator Survey Respondent three). Similarly, "paperwork compliance, too many things that take away from the important role of our job – children" (Educator Survey Respondent 8). This research adds value to the discussion on the changing nature of educators' work.

Similarly, Grant et al. (2016) investigated the changing nature of early childhood teachers' work under the NQS, as discussed in Chapter two, section 2.2.5. The increased demands on workload, which occurred as a direct result of increased compliance policies, procedures and paperwork, were noted across the sector. Grant et al. (2016) presented a discussion on the changing role of early childhood educators, stipulating that of importance is the "effects of a culture of audit and the associated language of assessment, ratings, accountability, quality improvement, goal setting, standards and evidence on the everyday work of teachers" (p. 39).

This research further supports the work of Grant et al. (2016), as educators within this case study reported that the National Quality Standards (2011) had changed the nature of their role. Educators' responses supported the notion of the NQS increasing workload due to compliance paperwork. Furthermore, the increase in workload was without the commensurate increase in benefit to learning and did not align with the perceived needs of families. They indicated that they felt pressure to document learning and seek family input into programming, which resulted in an increase in their workload demands and a decrease in actual time spent working with children. Similarly, research by Corr, Cook, LaMontagne, Davis, and Waters (2017), and

Cumming et al. (2015), found that early childhood reforms have resulted in an increased workload for educators striving to achieve the institutional policy definition of quality in a mandated and measured environment focused on compliance. Likewise, educators throughout this research indicated that they felt that in order to achieve a positive outcome in the Assessment and Rating process, they must have documented evidence of collaborations that would contribute to how the quality of their program was determined.

Furthermore, it was apparent that educators in this study reacted in similar ways to those in the Grant et al. (2016) project, whose research investigated the influence of regulatory texts on teachers' work (Chapter two, section 2.2.5). Grant et al. (2016) present the following extract from educators who participated in their research:

#### Extract 5

Lisa: the whole need for visual documentation has required parents to have input and write on your program planning. Well, I got nothing from anybody ... Just because parents aren't writing on my planning doesn't mean that they're not contributing, so it's all about that visual documentation. [Parents] are not interested in reading too much, writing too much, but very happy to come in if you ask them by word of mouth, Oh could you come in and show everybody how you did that screen printing? (p. 43)

This example from Grant et al. (2016) further highlight concerns regarding the use of documentation, such as portfolios as a means of proving quality in early childhood education. These sentiments also appear to be reinforced in this research with educators articulating that the increase in compliance requirements was detracting from the time they could spend engaging with children, furthermore affirming the findings from Grant et al. (2016). There also appeared to be a devaluing of interactions that occur verbally rather than written, with educators

continually attempting to get written co-contributions that can be shown in assessment and rating visits as evidence of achieving quality in that standard.

In this research educators appeared to hold an unquestioned notion that co-contribution to curriculum was indeed an indicator of quality and that families wanted to be part of this contribution. The NQS are the supposed yardstick of quality with many educators simply accepting that co-contribution equals quality, and that families who are engaged in their child's education would naturally contribute. Educators' comments at times reflected a feeling of defeat, in that numerous attempts to collaborate on curriculum with families was not successful. In some instances, there was an underlying negative judgment made of parents' willingness to engage based on families understanding of, or commitment to, early childhood education itself. When asked about the barriers to collaboration, this was one response from the initial survey:

Time – some parents being available to stop and look ... Parents' lack of knowledge in the importance of the education of their young child. I believe they see that education starts when the child begins school. Parents' lack of awareness of the importance of our roles in their child's daily learning and how educators are always striving to challenge their child's learning environment. (Educator Survey Respondent 46)

Through observations and interactions across all three case studies, many educators indicated that families rarely contributed to curriculum decision making. What was not interrogated in the design of this study (originally outside the scope of this research and therefore not investigated) was what co-contribution to curriculum looked like? What is a co-contribution, and how is it measured for the purposes of meeting the NQS? Although this question was not specifically asked of educators, associated discussions with educators across settings indicated that co-contribution might entail the sharing of children's interests or activities outside the setting, therefore providing educators with the possibility to extend these. However, detailed

investigation of educators' perceptions of co-contribution was not part of this research. It was interesting to note that through observations and discussions with educators, all indicated that when the chance arose educators engaged in verbal conversations with families regarding children's interests and activities. Educators confirmed that families did participate and contribute to these conversations willingly. Therefore, if families are verbally interacting with educators about what their child is interested in, or what they did on the weekend, then I question that this is indeed co-contribution to the curriculum in reality?

The results of this research indicate that documented evidence appears to be more valuable and therefore prioritised over modes that provide less specific and measurable outcomes for meeting compliance regulations. Supporting this line of thinking is research by Grant et al. (2018), who reported that physical documentation had increased under Australian ECEC reforms as it made compliance visible and allowed for proof of practice. Therefore, this may explain the findings of this study, whereby educators were focused on documenting quality through the use of social media. Is it only the written form that counts as co-contribution, or is it more about what can be 'proved' and physically shown as co-contribution? Consequently, the data from this survey reinforces that the role of the early childhood educator has changed under the NQS with collaborative partnerships focused on collecting evidence in a compliance culture. The following section provides a discussion re-imagining quality to a narrative of meaning-making.

#### **4.8 Re-imagining quality – a narrative of meaning-making?**

It has been established that the discourse of quality has been applied as a measurement of standardised universal truths (Dahlberg et al., 1999) and that striving to meet these is ultimately a struggle that cannot be won. This is important and relevant in this research as the findings have demonstrated how educators are using social media collaborations to prove quality of

compliance. Therefore, a questioning of the notion of quality and the reconceptualisation of moving beyond quality, to a language of meaning-making, is discussed in light of the findings from this research.

Interviews with educators and analysis of the artefacts established that collaborative partnerships in this research are being driven by a need to evidence quality. However, missing from the discourse of quality was the questioning of why, what, and for whom? In problematising quality, Moss (2013) suggested:

As the definition of quality is taken for granted and treated as a given, the main focus of the discourse of quality is the achievement and evaluation of this expert defined specification. The discourse places more emphasis on the question ‘how do we identify quality?’ than on proceeding questions ‘what do we mean by quality and why?’ and ‘how and by whom has quality been defined?’ (p. 99)

Similarly, Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) assert that the discourse of quality in ECEC in Australia dominates our thinking of what could be possible in education; “this dominance is so pervasive that it becomes difficult to think about quality in any other terms, putting limitations on what is possible to think when it comes to quality early childhood education” (p. 54). The questions of Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) and Moss (2019) are especially pertinent when applied to this research. What do we mean by quality collaborative partnerships, and why? Why are collaborative partnerships (and by means of inclusion, curriculum collaborations) important? Who has defined these as important and why? Ultimately, how are they measured and by whom? These questions acted as prompts in further discussing the artefacts collected as part of this research.

The data and artefacts collected in this research indicated that educators were using social media posts as evidence of compliance in meeting the NQS. Remembering that curriculum

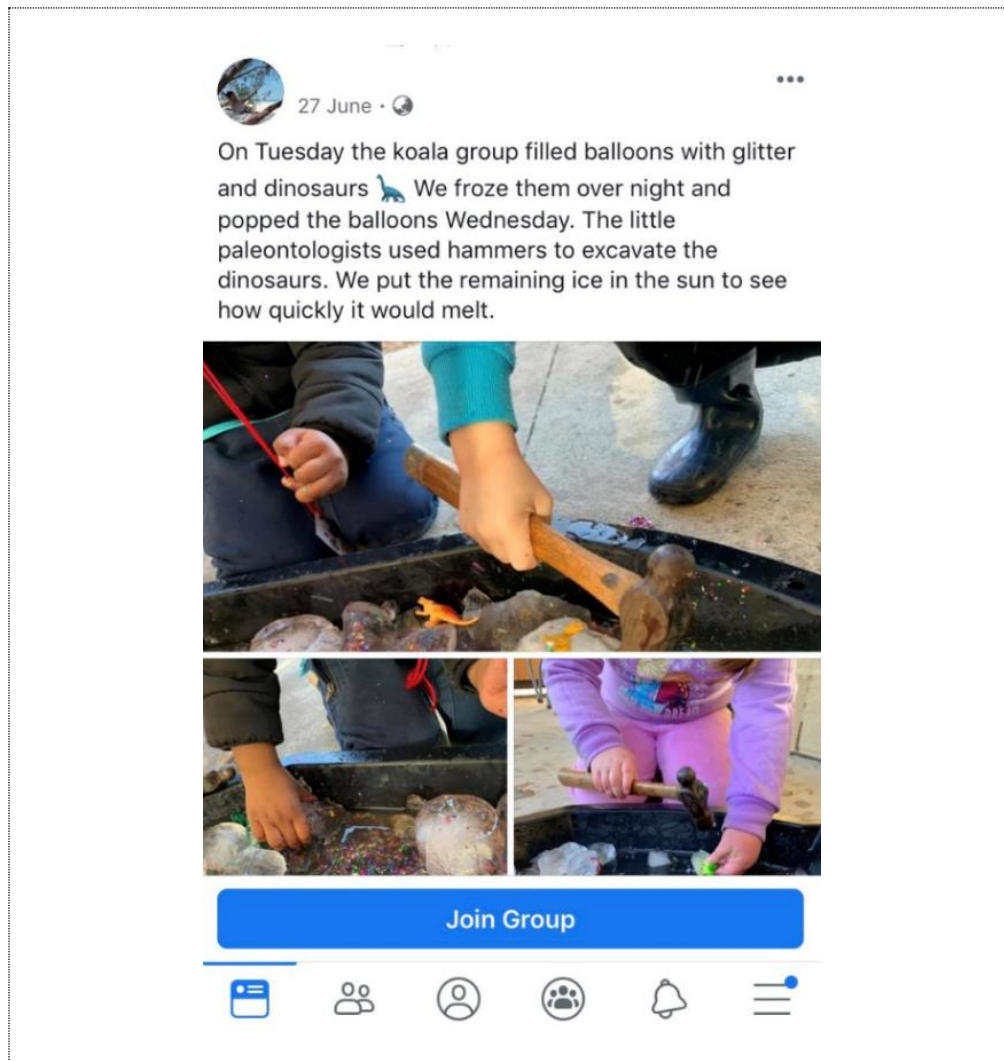
documentation or programming planning can be referred to as pedagogical documentation in early childhood research (refer to Chapter two, section 2.2.1), many of the posts in this research were examples of pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg, 2019) and depicted what educators and children were engaged in for learning purposes. Educators commented that they perceived the sharing of the curriculum to promote families' engagement with the curriculum, inform families of the EYLF and perhaps invite co-collaboration. Although educators did not use the terminology of pedagogical documentation, they did employ the use of curriculum planning and program planning, which is in principle the same and represents the language used by educators in Australia.

The pedagogical documentation itself is not being questioned; most was of high quality and based on children's interests and an emergent curriculum. However, as established, using pedagogical documentation as an evidence base of quality is problematic. Pedagogical documentation is valuable and has an important role in ECEC; however, is the aim of the pedagogical documentation about evidencing quality or allowing possibilities? Subsequently, for whom is the documentation intended, families or regulators? Is it more about feeding a forced compliance culture to meet standards and outcomes? Or is it about demonstrating to families the educational program and possibilities of learning with children?

Examining Figure 28, an artefact from Facebook setting three, this post is an example of pedagogical documentation. According to the educator Elly, this post was intended to elicit responses from families that could be used to shape curriculum decisions. It shows children engaged and involved in learning experiences involving scientific concepts. It probably meets a range of learning outcomes within the EYLF, and although an example of pedagogical documentation, it may be beneficial to families who want to engage in conversation with their child about their day and follow through with learning opportunities at home more broadly. The use of social media on this occasion could have opportunities for improving engagement

between educators and families when they understand the learning that is occurring. Figure 35 is an example of a social media post that perhaps meets the needs of both educators and families alike.

**Figure 35: Facebook post**



Juxtaposing this was Figure 28 from the research (p. 244). This post was provided by Elly (Facebook setting two) as an example of evidencing engaging with families – yet it is questionable what there is for families to engage with? The artefact clearly links to the EYLF with mention of Learning Outcomes; however, what value does this provide for families in collaborating? Similarly, in an assessment and rating cycle, what does this post evidence? Yes, it mentions learning outcomes from the EYLF and, yes, it has been sent to families – but is this

what is meant by quality collaborative practice? Furthermore, the artefacts in this research demonstrated that educators are using social media as a way to evidence and prove quality; this further supports the position of Osgood (2006) who asserts that neoliberal policy reduces educator autonomy and results in regulatory diktats.

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter two, section 2.4) Dahlberg et al. (1999); Hunkin (2018) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015) challenge the notion of quality as standardised performance outcomes and targets, and question what is meant by the term quality? They assert that this standardised notion of quality is more about a system of control and compliance rather than on actual practice. Furthermore, Dahlberg (1999) recommends a reconceptualization of the narrative of quality moving beyond “How do we identify quality?” to “What do we mean by the term quality and why?” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 99).

The pedagogical documentation as seen in the artefacts in this study appear to focus more on evidencing learning than collaborative practice. What appears to have developed is a competing agenda of meeting neoliberalist requirements and meeting the needs of families. In this small-scale study, this resulted in a disconnect between meaningful collaborative practice and collaborative practice based on notions of the never-changing norm of quality compliance.

When educators use pedagogical documentation as a measure of compliance, the value of the documentation itself needs to be examined. Missing from the discourse is a questioning of the value of documentation. For whom is the documentation for? What is it showing? How does this encourage meaningful collaboration? Having established that the notion of quality is often unattainable due to lacking specificity, the following section provides a discussion on re-imagining the narrative of quality to better articulate the specificities, that is, meaning-making. This is relevant in light of the findings of this research as the implications for practice call for moving beyond quality to a reconceptualising of meaning-making.

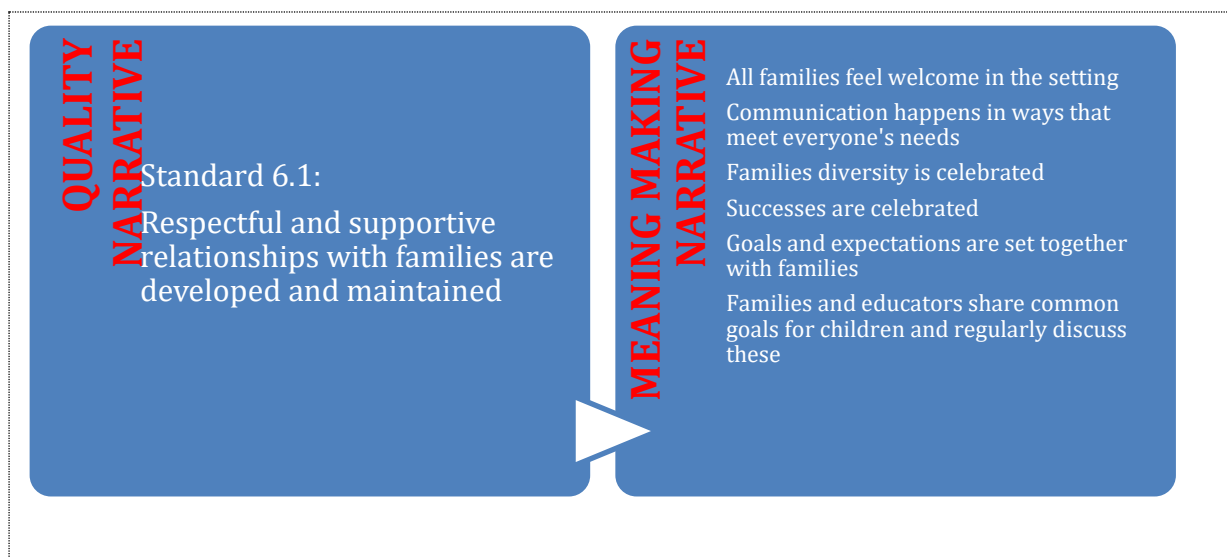
In considering the research intentions of this study, reconceptualising quality would enhance the ways in which social media could be used to collaborate and connect with families. Similarly, as presented by Dahlberg (2019); Duhn and Grieshaber (2016) and Moss (2019), a language that juxtaposes standardised quality such as that under the NQS would involve thick description and meaning-making. Therefore, if educators had a language that was not quality-centric, they could clearly articulate their values, beliefs and goals in establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships. Consequently, providing a lens from which to view and interpret the value of collaborative practice with families and a means to enact this through social media. In this way, clearly articulating the value of collaborative partnerships without the cloud of compliance could enhance the potential of using social media with families.

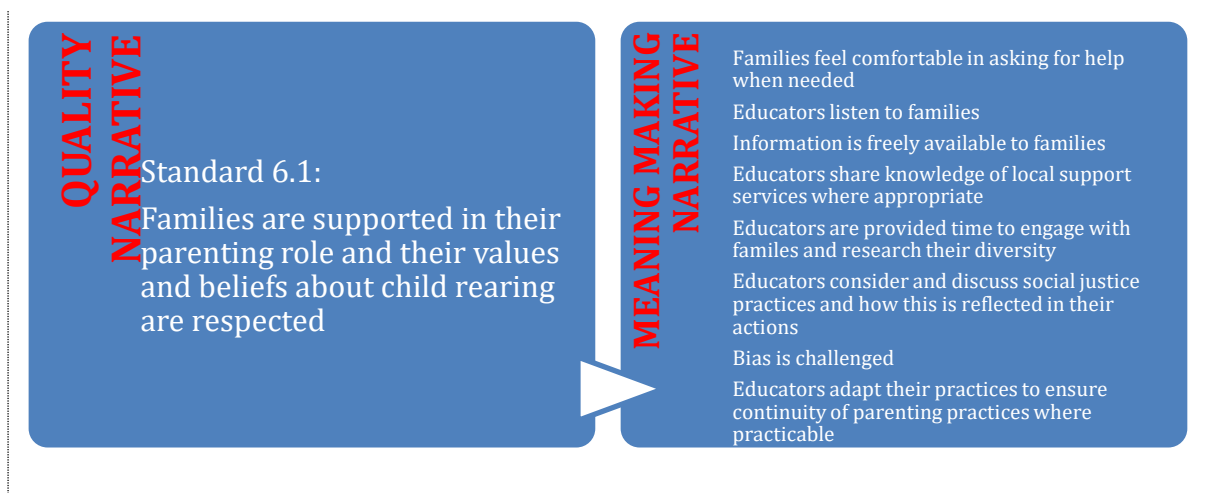
This would create a new narrative that moves away from pedagogical documentation as evidence for families and compliance. Perhaps the nature and intent of the collaborations themselves could be better shaped to meet the needs of both families and educators. In unpacking NQS 6.1 and 6.2, and turning these into provocations or thick description (Duhn & Grieshaber, 2016) for discussion (Figure 36), educators would perhaps interpret the need for partnerships in new ways, subsequently impacting the intent and outcome of collaborative practice.

Figure 36 was derived after a review of the literature (Dahlberg, 2019; Duhn and Grieshaber, 2016; Moss, 2019) and the analysis of the findings of this study. The literature highlighted the pressures between mandated policy and the rhetoric on quality. Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed educators' overwhelming desire to build collaborative partnerships with families as evidence of quality. The disconnect between what educators and families expect and want from the collaborations themselves prompted the creation of Figure 36 as a way of 'making meaning' of the collaborations between educators and families.

If educators were to question what the NQS standards 6.1 and 6.2 mean for their practice and attempt to articulate what this might look like in their service, a new dialogue that makes visible the meaning of these could be achieved. Instead of using unachievable statements of quality such as "families are supported in their role" (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012, p. 91), clearly specifying what this looks like in practice – such as educators share information on local support services, and educators modify practice to ensure continuity of families practices where practicable – would allow for specificity. Clearly articulating for both the educator and the family what the intention of the collaborative partnership is, could create a new dialogue between educators, families and those who assess services against quality. In this way, when educators and families can articulate what they are attempting to achieve from collaborative partnerships, both parties have visible meaning-making. A reconceptualised language of meaning-making (Dahlberg, 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2019) that would provide specificity rather than rely on the unachievable notion of quality that lacks any kind of specificity.

**Figure 36: Re-imagining Quality Area 6**





## 4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the results obtained through the educator surveys, and presented the three case studies using email, Storypark and Facebook, as well as the responses from parents in a smaller survey.

The educator surveys had seventy-five respondents; it was from these surveys that the three cases for further investigating the use of social media to collaborate with families were derived. The three case studies were built around the types of social media being used in ECEC settings. Case one investigated the use of email to collaborate and found that although some practices had changed, it was likely not revolutionary in its ability to foster collaborative partnerships. The second case study was the use of Storypark to build collaborative partnerships with families. This case study did uncover some possibilities in its use, with educators embracing its use to collaborate with families. Families' perspectives of Storypark were interesting with families commenting that they were overwhelmed by posts and felt pressure to respond, implications for families are further discussed in Chapter five. The final case study examined the different uses of Facebook within three ECEC services to build collaborative partnerships with families. The different uses of Facebook were centred around privacy settings and who had access to content posted. Although some educators in this case study did express that Facebook offered new opportunities for collaboration, the differing uses were also problematic

in terms of privacy and access. This chapter also provided a discussion on families' perspectives with results from the family survey and vignettes from observations in the setting when they were present, adding value to areas such as frequency of posts and curriculum co-contribution. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the findings in light of the literature presented in Chapter two. Chapter five discusses the implications of the findings and highlights some of the critical implications that emerged in the third space. These discussions are framed around a discourse of quality supported by relevant literature in the field.

## 5 Chapter five – Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1 Chapter overview

The research reported in this thesis aimed to examine the ways in which the use of social media might provide new opportunities for collaborative practices with families in early years settings. The findings from the three case studies provided insights into how educators and families are using social media to collaborate in changing contemporary early childhood educational landscapes. The inductive flexible nature of the research methodology allowed for alternative questions to be spontaneously generated to guide the research as new ways of thinking and doing emerged. This chapter presents a summary and synthesis regarding the transformative implications of the findings from the research data, and connects these findings with contemporary discussions around the issues of what constitutes quality in early childhood education today. In an attempt to present the perspectives of educators and families regarding the use and impact of using social media on collaborative partnerships, key themes that emerged in the data analysis are discussed through a quality lens and linked back to the overarching research questions: *How does the use of social media provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting? And, What are the implications of the use of social media for educators?*

### 5.2 A return to the research questions

Applying the lens of third space to this research allowed for new and emerging practices to be explored in a novel hybrid space. The findings here revealed a culture of compliance driven by a rigorous regime of performance measurements against the perceived nature of the NQS statements, to demonstrate and prove what constituted conceptualisations about quality in policy documents. Several conclusions and implications for practice in the use of social media

to build and sustain collaborative practices with families in the early years have arisen from this research and are summarised below:

- Social media is being used to document and provide evidence of compliance under a neoliberal regime of evidencing quality
- That conceptualisations of the term ‘quality’ are subjective; it is not singular notion and cannot simply be measured against a policy agenda such as those outlined under the NQS
- That the use of social media in the early years setting increases frequency and access of communications between educators and parents
- The purpose and intent of the ways in which collaborations are perceived often differ significantly between educators and families, resulting in a misalignment of expectations
- The use of social media in the early years setting has not been seen to significantly improve the level of co-contribution to curriculum design; however, co-contribution is not clearly understood by parents and educators – or at least they do not have a shared understanding
- The use of social media in the early years setting has implications on educators’ autonomy, workload and professional identity

In addressing the research questions, it can be concluded that using social media can afford new opportunities for collaborations between early childhood educators and families. The key findings from each of the case studies are summarised in the table below:

**Table 16: Summary of findings in each case**

| Email                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The use of <b>email</b> did increase communication in terms of accessibility with families, yet it did not increase co-curriculum collaborations. In this way, the use of email tended to replace existing communication practices rather than provide new opportunities for collaboration.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Storypark                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| The use of <b>Storypark</b> increased frequency of collaborations/communication and held some potential for curriculum collaborations. However, so far, these have been limited, not because of the technology but rather because parents were reluctant to engage with educators at this level of providing feedback and suggestions about the curriculum and program. In this way, Storypark may afford new opportunities for curriculum collaboration with families, yet, as families indicated that they were not overtly interested in curriculum collaborations, it is unlikely to eventuate. The use of Storypark did highlight the question of quality in interactions with educators, with some families reporting they felt overwhelmed, under pressure and judged by educators if they did not respond to postings. Therefore, the use of Storypark enabled opportunities for collaboration, yet it also problematised partnerships between educators and families. |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| The use of <b>Facebook</b> did increase the frequency of communications, yet its varied use of public or private pages did invite issues regarding privacy. As with the email and Storypark cases, the use of Facebook did not increase families' collaborations in terms of contributing to the curriculum. Furthermore, educators using Facebook did report an increase in after-hours communications, especially with the use of private messaging.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

Social media (as noted in Table 16 above) did provide new opportunities for collaboration with families in the early years setting. The practices that emerged in the third space were: increase in communications due to communications being more accessible, and the ability to share communications with extended family more easily. These collaborations were primarily centred around immediacy and access to information posted to parents to keep them current about their children's learning. Regardless of the form of social media, the theme of frequency

and ease of access was rated highly with both educators and families, both groups citing this as an advantage of social media being used in building collaborative partnerships. This research found that parents and educators using social media to collaborate perceived it as being a positive development in terms of the immediacy and access it offers both parties. This is further supported by existing research that suggests that digital technologies, including social media, have the potential to strengthen collaborative partnerships as a result of an increase in the number, frequency, speed and efficiency of communications (Ho, Hung, & Chen, 2013; Lewin & Luckin, 2010).

Furthermore, this research uncovered a culture of compliance driven by a rigorous regime of performance measurements against the perceived nature of the NQS to demonstrate and prove quality. Educators who took part in this research used social media as a way of evidencing collaborating partnerships with families. The following section discusses the concept of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in context of the data gathered in this research, using examples of practice and vignettes from educators and families.

### **5.2.1 Neoliberal thinking – early childhood education and care as an economic assurance**

It has been established (refer to Chapter two, section 2.4) that the Australian policy reform in ECEC is underpinned by neoliberalist ideology (Hunkin, 2018; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015) that position early childhood education and care as an economic commodity for the overall good of society. The policy framework is underpinned by the notion that quality is the primary goal of ECEC in a bid to improve future economic outcomes. However, the term ‘quality’ which is used explicitly within the National Quality Standards (NQS) and Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is lacking necessary context. Of relevance here are the questions: Who defines what quality looks like for each stakeholder? Do the policymakers, i.e. government, have the same understanding of quality as that of educators or that of families? Can quality be

contextual and fluid, for example, does quality in metropolitan Melbourne look the same as that in regional Queensland? Do educators and families share the same contextual understanding of the term quality? Early childhood education and care in Australia, inclusive of its educators, is judged on the quality provision, yet absent is a shared understanding of what quality entails and how perceived quality meets the needs of both educators and families.

The data collected in this research indicated that many educators felt that providing advice to families on parenting was a major part of their role as an educator based on directives implicit in the EYLF and NQF. At times the qualitative comments positioned the educators as experts on parenting and families as in need of this expert advice. The notion of educators as experts and parents as requiring specific education and learning knowledge creates a context of power imbalances (Hadley & Rouse, 2018) and has the potential to render the collaborative partnership as being unequal, and therefore problematic.

Furthermore, all educators who took part in this research, regardless of the social media used, held similar conceptualisations of collaborative practice with families. However, there was a distinct difference in attitude and understanding of the role of the educator in relation to the National Quality Standards (NQS), Element 6.2, which states that "families are supported in their parenting role, and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected" (ACECQA, 2012, section 6). This was relevant in the context of this research as the underlying premise of the Australian Government's ECEC reform agenda, and hence the establishment of the NQS and EYLF was that investing in the early years as a form of social investment would reap reward in terms of future productivity (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Morel et al., 2012). In this case study, educators' understanding of and attitude towards element 6.2 of the NQS varied, with some educators positioning parents as requiring support, whereas others were cautious about a deficit model view of parents and their ability to parent.

The NQS Element 6.2, Parenting Support, was designed as a means of providing families with support in their parenting role. It is based on the assumption that investing in ECEC improves social disadvantage and social isolation (Hunkin, 2018; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Refer to Chapter 2, section 2.4 for further details. It was significant to find from the data in this research that throughout the observations and interactions with families across all three settings, no family indicated that they saw educators as a source of advice regarding the nature of parenting. Although families were not asked a direct question regarding NQS Element 6.2, throughout conversations based on the importance of collaboration between educators and families, their responses were centred on keeping informed and knowing about their individual child's progress. No family identified themes of support from educators as being important. The discrepancy between educators' perceived role of supporting families and families' perceptions of the role of the educator is problematic if reciprocal and collaborative partnerships are to be realised.

Furthermore, this thinking was supported in a similar study by McFadden and Thomas (2016) on digital documentation in early childhood settings. Parents indicated that using online platforms to develop relationships with their child's educator was a low priority for them. Hence, families were not looking to build supportive relationships or seek parenting advice from educators, as NQS 6.2 would suggest. Families within the study by McFadden and Thomas (2016) indicated that they predominantly wanted to see images of their child and find ways of engaging with their child. The research by McFadden and Thomas (2016) further confirms the discrepancy between the perceived needs of families and what they seek from collaborative partnerships. The findings from families involved in this study affirm this, with parents from email, Storypark and Facebook settings indicating that what they wanted from the collaborative partnerships was to be kept informed, and opportunities that allowed them to engage with their child. However, this did not align with many educators' views on what they

perceived the value of collaborative partnerships to be – a means of offering parenting support as well as to evidence the NQS.

The research reported here is significant since it found that social media can offer the potential to increase the level of communication between families and educators in terms of frequency and accessibility. However, there is no evidence to suggest that collaborative partnerships, regardless of social media used, facilitate or support vulnerable families. Remembering that Element 6.2 was introduced as a means of supporting vulnerable families in their role as parents (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Fenech, 2011), this research does not have data to indicate that social media has afforded new opportunities that may provide support or enhance partnerships in terms of disadvantaged families. Furthermore, one might consider that disadvantaged families may not prioritise collaborating with educators as of upmost importance.

If the economic drive was intended to support disadvantaged or vulnerable families (Heckman, 2012; Productivity Commission, 2007), it would appear that support from a wider network other than just the educator may be needed. The majority of collaborations using social media tended to be in individual posts to families and not necessarily in group spaces that invited a wider audience of collaborations. This was confirmed by the Hernandez family, a refugee family within case study two, Storypark. As discussed in case study two (Chapter four, section 4.5), the Hernandez family indicated that they felt that the use of social media reduced the opportunity for social interactions and the establishment of new relationships within their community. They were not confident in using the social media application Storypark and therefore did not engage in its use. The use of Storypark for reminders and other communication that was individualised (from educator to specific parents) meant that for this family, opportunities to meet other families, interact and build relationships were limited. Similarly, the level of English language skill required to engage with Storypark properly could also present challenges in similar situations. Through interactions and conversations during

researcher observations it was established that this Hernandez family felt that the use of Storypark for them personally, actually isolated them from the community within the real-world setting. Importantly, this is one family's perspective, and therefore generalisations cannot be made, however, it is important to consider the complexities and challenges of considering and meeting the diverse needs of families. Consequently, it would be important to note that if the majority of collaborations are moved online then the random opportunities for conversations (such as in the case of Hernandez family) are reduced, and socially vulnerable families could become more isolated. As an underlying premise of the introduction of ECEC reforms in Australia is concerned with supporting social disadvantage, the following section discusses the connection between social media and the impacts of isolation.

The research on social media and social isolation is robust (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Primack, Karim, Shensa, Bowman, Knight & Sidani, 2019; Robards & Bennett, 2011). Findings suggest that popularity online, for example, having a significant amount of friends or followers, is not an indicator of happiness or feelings of social connectedness (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011). However, Primack et al. (2019) discuss social isolation and the positive and negative experiences of social media and confirmed that having positive social media experiences does not reduce social isolation, yet having negative experiences does increase social isolation. Although the study by Primack et al. (2019) does not directly relate to the experiences of this case study as it did not examine social isolation, it is interesting to note that feelings of social isolation did emerge from one family (Hernandez family) using Storypark. Consequently, this reinforces the notion that the diverse needs of families are central to developing and maintaining collaborative partnerships that benefit both educators and families.

Furthermore, many of the social media applications used, such as Storypark, focus on collaboration between the educator and families directly, and therefore opportunities to

facilitate connections between families within a service and the wider community are somewhat reduced. Although facilitating families' engagement within a broader community context is not directly stated as part of an educator's role, all educators used terms such as building a community or kindergarten community when discussing what collaborative practice meant to them (interviews and observations). Therefore, the importance of social media and establishing a sense of community is relevant in this context. Social media has been seen as a facilitator of relationships (Ellison et al., 2011; Waytz & Gray, 2018) yet the potential for family to family relationship building may need to be considered when potential social opportunities are reduced by inbox to inbox communication that excludes opportunities for social connectedness. Email communication in case study one was from educator to family; Storypark and Facebook communications were also of a one-sided nature and between only educator and family. Historically, families may have gathered in a foyer of a kindergarten to read a notice or look at photos and reflections (as in the case of Facebook setting one), hence inviting possibilities for family to family interactions. If opportunities for interactions are removed as notices and photos are disseminated via social media (as in the case of Facebook setting three), there may also be a loss of spaces in which families can build a community. Subsequently, opportunities that may have been a catalyst for social interaction could potentially be reduced by the use of social media, as suggested in this research.

This research adds value to the research literature since it found that there is an apparent disparity between educators' and families' understandings of collaborative practice that have the potential to be problematic in achieving quality for all stakeholders. Understanding the implications of such disparity for families, educators and education more broadly is discussed in the following sections.

## 5.3 Implications

### 5.3.1 Families

From the data reported in this thesis, it would seem that using collaborations between educators and families as an indicator of quality appears to be an unsatisfactory way of creating and ensuring that collaborations are relevant when the understanding of quality is rhizomatic. The two main implications for families were centred around:

1. A misalignment of the intention of the collaborations themselves
2. An overwhelming number of collaborations which has the potential to cause parent guilt and damage relationships

Quality is a subjective concept, and as data from this case study indicated, dependent upon the stakeholders' interpretations of what constitutes good practices in early childhood. The NQS stipulates that quality collaborations are characterised by parents and educators engaging in co-design of the curriculum. However, the document does not provide examples of what this might look like in practice. Educators are advised that collaborating with families is an indicator of quality, but no one seems to question what quality collaborations might entail from a family's perspective. The data from this study is significant as it indicates that families simply wanted to be kept informed about their child's educational experience. They did not want to participate in curriculum decisions and as the data revealed, were not interested in the quality agenda and how it was manifested in the educational setting.

Throughout researcher observations in the setting, families indicated that the frequency of notifications were sometimes overwhelming and distracted them from their role, often in their place of work. For example, the Virgato family commented, "sometimes I just don't have time during the day to look at posts from kindergarten, does that make me a bad parent? But I also have to work" Virgato family, Storypark, observation three). If the nature of the collaborations

from educators does not necessarily align with the desires of families, then the communications have the potential to become one-way with forced or contrived responses from families. However, families also reported the benefits of social media being that it enabled conversations to be had with their child (enabling a parent to engage with the child about the activities undertaken that day); therefore, the balance between bombarding families with communications and enabling conversations is complex.

Families indicated that they were feeling pressured to respond and uphold an image of being a 'good parent' with their reciprocal comments. When applications such as Storypark capture analytics that track responses and provide educators with data on how often families are accessing content posted, the intent, use and impact of such information must be considered. If families feel pressure to collaborate, as indicated by a specific curriculum contribution, then relationships have the potential to become judgmental and resentful. If educators are using analytics data to monitor when and how often families are engaging in an online space, then this is not what the 'collaborative partnership' was designed to be. Who can benefit from partnerships of this quality?

### **5.3.2 Educators and professional identity**

The two main implications for educators were centred around:

1. A decrease in educator autonomy
2. An increase in the total amount of working hours

With increased compliance paperwork for educators noted in the findings, this research also brings to the fore the perceived removal of educator autonomy and agency in determining what is important to document and be compliant with. The pressure to constantly measure up to external forces and the perceived removal of educators' agency in judging quality within their

own early childhood setting adds a level of complexity to an educator's role in building collaborative partnerships with families. This was evident in statements from educators indicating that compliance was dictating their workload for example, “[I] Feel a greater demand for i’s dotted and t’s crossed and with greater emphasis on this overspending quality time learning with the children” (Educator Survey Respondent three). This research adds value and builds upon that of Grant et al. (2016), whose findings support that educators are losing their voice in determining what quality entails in early childhood education. Grant et al. (2016) confirmed that the introduction of new reforms and regulatory texts, in a culture dominated by compliance procedures, reliant and measured by successful official assessment and ratings of a centre, have changed the way in which educators have agency in their own role as an educator. This was noted by Grant et al. (2016):

Regulatory texts (guidelines) set the parameters for particular courses of action through the production of evidence that teachers must adhere to for successful assessment and rating of the centre. Lisa's account indicates that the regime of accountability operating through the assessment and rating texts subjugates her authority to judge what is important in her work. No longer able to decide what is important for herself, Lisa is 'judged' by external forces in the form of authorised assessors who evaluate the quality of her work. 'Quality' from Lisa's standpoint has become measurable through the production of evidence that assessors, as authorised experts, can appraise and evaluate.

(p. 42)

In an environment of accountability, the research reported here supports the notion that there appears to be a resulting loss of educator autonomy and agency which ultimately impacts both children and families (Boyd, 2013; Logan et al., 2012; Osgood, 2006; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). The findings of this research support that of Logan et al. (2012) where educators have focused on compliance (shaped by the NQS) dictating the nature and extent of the

collaborations with families. The EYLF and NQS set parameters regarding collaborative partnerships that are measured and assessed in quality and assessment ratings. Lacking from these policy documents and their implementation based on a compliance culture is the perspective from a range of families; not all families are the same, and therefore not all partnerships are the same. Educators' sense of agency in establishing quality relationships with each individual family provides the basis for understanding each family's perspective. Not all families within a setting want to be involved and contribute to shared decisions, yet settings are assessed and measured against this across contexts. A better understanding that could be reflected in policy and practice would be a consideration of the nature of what individual families value in collaborative partnerships; this would allow educators to truly meet the needs of all families. The pressure to collaborate in the same kinds of ways with every family may be impeding the relationships between some families and educators and highlights the disparity between the intentions of the collaborative practice.

The data collected through surveys and interviews in this research indicated that educators felt that their workload had qualitatively changed since the introduction of the NQS. The vast majority of those surveyed indicated that their workload had increased and that this increase was compliance related, and not connected to practical teaching tasks. Neither did they feel that it improved their practice. Educators indicated that they were now working longer hours each day, with the majority working in excess of their paid allocation of hours. In addition to an increase in the total hours worked was the notion of a change in the nature of traditional working hours. Educators who took part in this research indicated that their working hours had changed and that traditional business hours of nine to five no longer applied. In effect, they were working unpaid hours at home prior to and after coming to the workplace.

The data pertaining to the amount of hours spent working, presented in Chapter four, (Figure 21) indeed revealed that educators are working longer hours and/or working outside the

traditional working day, which may be a consequence of the implementation of the NQS. Eighty-six per cent (n=70) of educators completed the survey for this research outside of traditional working hours. Similarly, of those educators who took part in the case studies, all those who were Bachelor qualified (therefore more responsibilities) reported an increase in working hours, identifying that they often worked outside the traditional working hours of 9 am to 5 pm. Thus, the data supports the contention that in this cohort, there has been a change in the ways in which educators are working. The implications of an increase or change in working hours requires further investigation, yet are outside the bounds of this research. Within the scope of this research, the change to educators' working hours and the notion of being accessible 24/7 is significant. Educators who participated in the case studies reported engaging and responding to families outside of work hours. The use of social media did appear to increase the immediacy and access to educators. Those using Facebook and Storypark all noted that after-hours communication was an expectation, but also something that allowed them to better respond to the needs of families. Surprisingly though, many of the educators who responded felt that this was simply part of their role as an educator and did not perceive this increase in access (24/7) as a negative outcome; for example, "Times have changed, if I want families to engage, then I need to respond to them when they message" (Elly, Facebook setting three, observation two). Similarly, in Chapter four, section 4.5, Vanna discussed the change to her working hours and the increase of compliance-type activities, including the need to respond to families, which have seen her engage in more after-hours work to ensure that regulatory requirements are met.

The data collected in this research indicates that there has been a change in the way educators work. There is not only the issue of longer working hours, but also much more focus on compliance-based activities. This appears to further exacerbate the number of hours worked and changes the dynamics of their role, and disrupts the notion of quality care. An increase in

working hours and the demands of operating under a compliance regime is likely to have consequences on educators' overall wellbeing. According to Cook et al. (2017), mental wellbeing of educators is, therefore, paramount in the narrative of quality care. What appears absent from this narrative are the demands placed on educators by the imposed standards of perceived quality (as discussed in Chapter two, section 2.4), and the impact that these may have on overall educator health. Consequently, the implications for educators working longer hours, and the increase in additional unpaid hours, are yet to be fully understood, yet overall mental health and wellbeing has been found to be implicit in providing quality care (Corr et al., 2017). Furthermore, data from a recent Australian early childhood workforce census indicated that factors such as job stress and culture may contribute to educators' decisions to relocate work places or to leave the sector altogether (Department of Education, 2014). Subsequently, an increase in the attrition rate of beginning educators entering the profession has been significant in the last decade, and this is a contributing factor that requires further investigation.

### **5.3.3 Using social media**

The main implication of social media use was centred around: the changing paradigm of social media in the context of the workplace.

The boundaries between home and work, and personal and professional identities are being reshaped and are a changing paradigm in a social media and workplace context according to Barnes et al. (2018). Findings from this case study further support this notion, with educators confirming that they now work in different ways and at different times of the day, facilitated by the use of technology. For example, as discussed by Anne Marie, "Storypark allows me to work from home, I no longer have to be at the centre to do my non-contact time, so it gives me more flexibility to work in a way that suits me and my family" (Anne Marie, case study two, Storypark). Although the data gathered through interviews and observations indicates a

Presence Bleed (Gregg, 2011), (where work-related tasks permeate into after hours time that was previously off limits), referring to educators working after hours, educators also reported that the functionality of social media allowed them to work from various locations. In other words, although educators were engaging with families after hours they also enjoyed that they could do this from home, consequently, it was both a negative and a positive feature of using social media.

Social media by nature does have the potential to permeate and 'bleed' (Gregg, 2011) into educators' personal lives whereby they are always on call and feel the need to respond to families outside of traditional work hours. In terms of the findings from this research, it was proposed by the educators that they need to be or should be available to families outside work hours as this represented best practice in terms of meeting the needs of families. For example, Anne Marie indicated that "educators should be responding to families in a way that meets a family's needs. If I get a notification at 20.00 from a parent concerned about something then to reassure that parent and maintain good collaborative practice, I should respond" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation one). This example demonstrates presence bleed (Gregg, 2011), which was consistent in the findings across all three cases. Interestingly though, as in the example above, it was often the educators themselves that held the view that educators should be available to families after hours if they were to be deemed good educators.

The pressures imposed either internally or by work colleagues further exacerbates the extension of work hours and the demands of a measured compliance culture, for example, "some teachers don't respond to families after hours but sharing with families and answering their questions is so important, it is part of our jobs" (Anne Marie, Storypark, observation one). Educators within this research have demonstrated that presence bleed (Gregg, 2011) is present in the early

childhood education space. Thus, this research adds value and highlights the implications for educators in terms of workload and mental wellbeing, which need to be further considered.

### **5.3.4 The education landscape**

The two main general implications for educators were related to:

1. Building families' agency in terms of collaborative practice
2. Raising the profile of early childhood educators more broadly

A challenging implication for practice within early education settings is that of how to best guide and build families' capacity in terms of engaging in collaborative practice. Research by Pushor (2011) suggests that often families' lack of collaboration is derived from their lack of confidence and lack of agency in interacting in an area that they feel they have no expertise in. If educators wish to build collaborative practice with families, perhaps investigating ways to build family agency and support in the collaboration processes should be considered. Social media use that builds capacity in terms of guiding families through the use of directed questions may be useful in scaffolding the nature of the collaborations themselves (Pushor, 2011). However, it could also be argued that the expectation for families to contribute to curriculum decisions actively may demean the role of the educator who is the professional in this area (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011). A policy that dictates that educators should seek input from families and have a shared role in curriculum design could potentially be undermining the knowledge held by educators and diminishing the professional identity of early childhood educators generally. Professionals who are experts in their field do not usually seek input from those who are not qualified in the discipline; the nurse does not seek co-contribution from patients or families on areas that require professional understanding and expertise. One educator within this research did raise this as a concern; "Parents bring things for us to use in

the program, but I do the programming, I know what is best for the children, what they are interested in, the frameworks, the parents don't know that” (Elly, case study three, Facebook).

Professional identity and raising the profile of early childhood educators generally was one of the goals of the Australian Government's reform agenda (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Researchers in early childhood have long discussed the implications of professional identity on workforce wellbeing and attrition (Ortlipp et al., 2011; Sumsion, 2005). Although government reforms and the drive for quality were supposed to impact positively on the status of the profession, more recently this has been debated by research by Ortlipp et al. (2011). Similarly, research by Sisson (2018) discusses the dominant discourse in early childhood professional identity and asserts that missing from this discourse is emotionality. Within a neoliberalist agenda, standardised approaches and measures surround the notion of quality. Whereas a discourse of emotionality embraces educators' knowledge and experience in decision making (Osgood, 2006). Consequently, Sisson (2018) highlights the complexities of a dominant discourse under compliance regimes. Furthermore, according to Miller, Dalli, and Urban (2012), key characteristics in teachers' professional identity include; “(a) attentiveness to surroundings and occurrences, (b) openness to individuality, diversity and joint meaning-making, (c) curiosity and (d) awareness of the other” (Miller et al., 2012, p. 147). Consequently, a result of this dominant discourse and a national reform agenda driven by productivity, educators' agency and ability to respond using their knowledge and experience, or with individuality, is limiting their professional identity (Ortlipp et al., 2011; Parkison, 2008; Sisson, 2018). A culture of compliance in the early childhood sector has the potential to impact how educators see themselves, how they respond with individuality, and how they communicate and collaborate with families. Similarly, it may be worthwhile to consider if an educator responding to a family at 10 pm about a lost jumper actually demonstrates quality collaborations and raises the profile of educators within the profession?

Overall professional identity and a perception of educators by the community as being professionals has been discussed widely (Gibson, 2013; Harwood & Tukonic, 2016; Miller & Dalli, 2014). More detail is provided in Chapter two, section 2.2.3. Similarly, professional identity and social media has also been widely researched in areas such as medicine and dentistry (Holden, 2017; O'Regan, Smithson, & Spain, 2018; Walton, White, & Ross, 2015). Research on social media and professional identity in the context of education remains limited (Jordan, 2019). In terms of this research, it is worth considering if educators who are responding to families via social media after hours are enhancing their professional identity or damaging it? In this way, when educators are spending considerable amounts of time (often after hours) engaging with families about low-level things such as lost jumpers, does this enhance the professional recognition of educators more broadly? The implication here is not the use of social media per se, but the way in which the social media is being used, the purpose and the time of day which educators are using social media for work-related purposes. For example, would patients and families send messages to nurses or doctors about lost clothes after hours expecting and receiving a response? Therefore, the ways in which educators are responding to the mandates of collaborative partnerships may well be damaging their professional identity and detracting from the notion of quality in early childhood education.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

### **5.4.1 The transformative research journey**

This research process has been dynamic, in that the aims of the research have been flexible and adaptable throughout the data collection and analysis processes. This was intentional in the design in order to allow new possibilities to emerge in an inclusionary, rather than exclusionary, way. The original intent of the research was to examine the ways in which early childhood educators were using social media to build collaborative partnerships with families.

This was done in an attempt to enlighten or provide guidance to a sector attempting to use social media without specific policy or guidelines.

The research began with the assumption that educators' practices and skills would vary from novice to more advanced levels, and that recommendations regarding successful uses of social media to enhance communication and collaborations would be included in their repertoire of experiences and interactions with parents and children in their preschool settings. However, what was not expected was that the researcher would question the underlying philosophy of collaborative partnerships and quality in early childhood as a result of incorporating new technologies into the pedagogical process. It was expected that through examining the many uses of social media in collaborating with families, various recommendations for practice would be made. However, the pivotal findings from the research centred around the disparity between educators' and families' understanding of the intent of the collaborations themselves, with many educators using the collaborations as a way to evidence quality in the context of the National Quality Standards (NQS). This research was significant as it exposed the ways in which educators are engaging with social media, resulting in a discussion on the intent of collaborations and the questioning of imposed quality.

This research was inspired by educators' desire to engage with families using a range of new technologies, including social media. Through my work as a quality consultant in early childhood education, I had observed educators' attempts at using social media with differing levels of success. In a climate where everything about your practice as an educator is measured and assessed, I witnessed educators attempting to engage with families using social media, in a bid to exceed the quality standards in collaborative partnerships set out in the NQF suite of policies. With the best of intentions, but without a guiding policy or research-based practice examples, the implications of social media use with families resulted in concerns about

professional identity and what constitutes ethical practices. It was through reflections on these challenges and provocations that the research questions were derived.

The research questions were designed to investigate the current landscape of collaborative practices generally and to document how the use of social media may provide opportunities for greater levels of collaborations and building partnerships. These considerations influenced the research theoretical framework of Third Space, which allowed for an inclusionary approach that investigated new possibilities while still valuing traditional practice. The data collected and analysed provided insights into how social media was being used, however, it also uncovered a dialogue of 'quality' that had me, as the researcher, questioning policy, investment in early childhood for economic productivity, and the notion that quality is measurable and exists only in one form (Hunkin, 2018; Moss, 2019). Therefore, this research was significant in building on the work of Dahlberg (2019); Moss (2019) and Hunkin (2018), in the context of social media and the perceived notion of quality.

In examining the literature on education reforms in early childhood with the overwhelming attention on quality (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Hunkin, 2018; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015), a common theme emerged – quality is subjective and not easily measured. The EYLF and NQF use the term 'quality' throughout, yet there is no explicit definition of what constitutes or defines quality (as discussed in Chapter one, section 1.3.4). Both documents include terms such as quality education and care, quality standards and learning outcomes that are based on achieving quality; however, an explicit definition of what quality is appears absent from the documentation. Is there an assumption that there was no, or low-quality, provision and outcomes before these reforms? That collaborating with families is new? Or, that there is only one way to achieve quality and we know what it looks like? What governments regard as quality is influenced by a range of factors. These might include parameters such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) rankings, and productivity

agendas (Hunkin, 2018). This research intended to investigate the ways in which educators are responding to the mandates and using social media to build collaborative partnerships. What was not originally considered in research design was whether these mandates could actually perform as an indication of quality? Educators within the sector, myself included, appear to have been caught up in the reform that these mandates must imply quality, and that these are in fact, based on evidence of what families want.

The reasoning for reform in early childhood is based on a neoliberal approach, whereby governments are interested in children and early childhood education as an investment for the future (Hunkin, 2016b; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). A concept of preparation for the future, valued not for who they are, but for what they can ultimately contribute in an economic capacity (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). This research further confirmed that the neoliberal approach being driven by a human capital agenda dictates a standardised approach and devalues educators' voice and agency in their role as educators with a professional identity. The rhetoric is grounded in an economist framework of productivity as evidenced in the Productivity Commission Report (Productivity Commission, 2007) which aligns early childhood education and children's achievement with links to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Consequently, Australian early childhood policy is underpinned by the need for teachers to develop the appropriate academic skills in children to ensure that they become productive citizens. This research further confirmed that the increased pressure on educators to respond to, and demonstrate externally imposed definitions of quality in the context of a top-down conforming quality assurance regime, may result in a loss of educator autonomy and an overall de-professionalisation of early childhood educators (Ortlipp et al., 2011).

The survey, interviews and artefacts collected in this research have demonstrated that educators are feeling pressured to perform the NQS and have visible documented evidence to justify their

practices. The use of social media appears to have become just one vehicle for evidencing the unattainable notion of quality. A screenshot of a post, or a platform that demonstrates compliance in an Assessments and Rating cycle may meet enforced measures of quality, yet does it meet the needs of educators and families more broadly? Lost in these collaborative partnerships that are focused on compliance, are the fundamental reasons why collaborating with families is valuable. The ways in which educators are interpreting the NQS and the pressure to prove quality is impacting their professional identity and therefore shaping their collaborative practice with families. Whatever the reasons, the risk of managing collaborative practice and the relationships with families is substantial when there is a disparity between the intentions of collaborations.

In accepting this top-down notion of quality in early childhood education being measured by standards, elements and outcomes, we reduce diversity and limit the voices of educators and families in what they perceive quality to be. It should be asked – what do families want from education and care providers? How do families define quality services? What do educators value and define as quality? In like mind, researchers such as Hunkin (2018); Jones et al. (2016) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015) assert that early childhood is more than a social investment in the future, and that a predetermined image of quality imposed on the sector as a means of financial investment needs to be questioned.

In this study, social media did enable communications to be fast and convenient for both families and educators. However, it also raised questions about the use of social media in evidencing compliance under the NQS. Perhaps applying Dahlberg's (2019) language of meaning-making and reconsidering what is posted, uploaded and shared, and for whom, would provide new, more insightful opportunities for authentic collaboration with families.

If the discourse of quality is controlled by a productivity agenda (Hunkin, 2016b), then the question needs to be asked as to whether it is the quality of education that is the priority, or whether it is simply regarded as a smart investment? When an external body is the definer of quality, how does this impact the educators and families? In response to the original research questions, if collaborative practice is mandated to ensure quality, how can these collaborations be measured when each party holds different intentions for these collaborations?

This research has provided a discussion on the ways in which collaborative practices via the use of social media can both inform and provide contexts to share with parents what types of learning activities their children are participating in. The significance of this research and the implications for practice demonstrate that social media does offer opportunity for collaborations, but that a compliance regime of imposed quality dominated the collaborations. Opportunities for further research to extend these findings include encouraging discussion about the re-imagining of quality from multiple perspectives, including those of families. Looking forward, I am optimistic that collaborative practices that enhance partnerships with families can be strengthened by the use of social media technologies and collaborative partnerships with families and, more broadly, learning outcomes for all children.

It is important to note that the data collected in this study occurred in a pre-COVID-19 world. As such, the data provides a previously ‘normal’ pre COVID-19 lens through which to view collaborative practice and social media use in the early childhood sector; this data can never be captured again. As it is impossible to erase the experiences and practices developed during the pandemic, it can be reasonably assumed, that the ways in which social media is used in early childhood contexts in 2020, will be forever impacted and shaped by the complexities of the COVID-19 experience.

## 6 Postscript

This year (2020) has been an unprecedented one with the world facing panic, horror and dismay as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been drastic measures worldwide to limit the spread of the disease, reduce social contact, and minimise infection rates (Kirti, Jatinder, Arshi, & Nandini, 2020). Quarantine, isolation and physical distancing have changed the ways in which we see ourselves as individuals and how we live and operate interdependently as a society. It is through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, then, that I seek to reflect on the complexity of engaging and collaborating with families in early childhood education. It is possible, now, to achieve new insight and sharpen our existing understandings by revisiting participants currently teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic via the case studies reported here and Facebook participants, (members of the closed Early Childhood Teachers where the initial survey was posted, see Chapter three, section 3.5).

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented change to the daily lives of communities, globally and locally, including the ways in which education has been experienced. In light of the shift towards online learning and remote and flexible delivery of education, investigating how educators engaged with social media, such as those explored in this study, during this time was of utmost interest. It was for this reason that this postscript is offered, with the goal of uncovering and discussing the ways in which educators are using email, Storypark and Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic to collaborate with families.

Not all educators who initially took part in this study were available to provide insights that related to COVID-19. In some settings, one educator provided commentary on how the setting as a whole had responded and used social media during the pandemic. The following sections outline how the use email, Storypark and Facebook were used to aid in educational delivery during the pandemic.

## 6.1 Email

Case study one (setting one) focused on the use of email in collaborating with families. This setting identified email as a form of social media as they perceived that email provided similar functionality to that of social media. Setting one identified that email, and its immediacy similar to that of social media, had shaped engagement and collaboration with families.

In recent conversations with participants from setting one, while movement and teaching restrictions were still in place, participants shared the ways in which the setting was collaborating with families and delivering the kindergarten program in a virtual space. Educators in this setting indicated that the use of email throughout the pandemic was limited. According to Rachel, the setting did not engage with email other than sending formal notifications from the Department of Education, such as notice of closure. The use of email did not increase; in fact, there was a decrease in the use of email to collaborate with families. Educators commented that email did not facilitate collaborative partnerships during the pandemic as the functionality of email was not as interactive as other modes. Although email had been the primary means of collaborating with families prior to the pandemic, educators at setting one realised emails would not allow for engaging delivery of kindergartens programs in a virtual space. Therefore, educators within setting one sought alternative ways of collaborating with families that would allow for video and voice to be shared easily. Consequently, educators reported using YouTube as the platform for remote delivery. According to Rachel, a private YouTube channel was created whereby families could connect with educators. The following conversation extract outlines how setting one collaborated with families during the pandemic:

I wanted children to be able to hear my voice and that of my co-educator. We started a YouTube channel and did songs, craft and stories ... we also created send home packs

[delivered via traditional mail] with craft and activities and encouraged families to send photos of work. We all agreed that distance learning was about offering respite for families and connection with kinder, not adding extra work or expectations. (Rachel, setting one, email, postscript conversation, June 2020)

In discussions with Rachel, it was evident that in the case of online delivery of kindergarten programs and collaborating with families, email did not offer the functionality for maintaining engaging connections. It was felt by educators in setting one that video and voice needed to be present, and this could not be facilitated by email, hence the move to a YouTube channel. Although originally the educators within setting one felt that email offered similar functionalities to that of other social media applications, under the current COVID-19 restrictions it was noted that email was not ‘social’ enough. Therefore, the move towards YouTube was felt to offer more authentic opportunities for collaborative practice with families. Consequently, the shift away from email due to its lack of collaborative functionality may reflect a more contemporary COVID-19 perspective of the use of email in collaborating with families.

## **6.2 Storypark**

Through postscript conversations with educators and Facebook participants, it was reported that the use of Storypark had increased through the pandemic. Educators using Storypark to collaborate with families reported a significant increase in the volume of Storypark use during the pandemic. Interestingly, for educators within case study two, Storypark became the primary method of communication for educators and families during the pandemic, being used by educators, families and children alike.

Educators reported that the vast majority of families who attended setting two (Storypark setting) ceased physical attendance at the setting during the pandemic. Storypark was used,

instead, to maintain a connection between the setting and families. Educators within setting two responded by using Storypark as the primary means for delivering a kindergarten program in an online space. The following statement from Anne Marie outlines the use of Storypark at setting two during the pandemic: “It’s such a great outcome when a few weeks ago I was thinking how in the world do we deliver a kindergarten program online? But voila! Somehow we do and do it well! Go us!” (setting two, Storypark, Postscript conversation, June 2020)

According to the educators in setting two and participants via the Early Childhood Facebook page, Storypark facilitated a virtual space where educators, families and children could stay connected and learn together. One comment by a member of the Early Childhood Teachers Facebook page was representative of the broader feeling. They said:

We use Storypark, and it has been instrumental in helping us provide online learning. We have been able to share videos from kinder and share activities for the children to do at home. The children and families can send photos and video back. It has been a key tool in communicating and supporting our families at this unusual time in early childhood education. (Early Childhood Teachers Facebook member, Storypark, postscript conversation, June 2020)

Educators using Storypark reported an increase in communication from families compared with before the pandemic. As discussed in the findings (Chapter four), Storypark use had tended to be one-sided with communication coming from the educators and little to no response from families. During the pandemic it was reported by educators that families were increasingly posting photos, comments and reactions, something that was not seen before COVID-19. The following explains one educator's insights into its use:

We saw a huge increase in families who posted back. Normally we might get a one- or two-word comment like "looks great" but most families look but don't respond. Since

we have been in isolation, families are responding so much more. I think it is their way of maintaining a connection for their child. We post videos and photos and families post things back. For example, we made slime with the few children who came to kinder, and we got about five families at home who also made slime and shared photos back with us. It was great. I hope that it continues after all of this [COVID-19], but I know everyone will be busy when things get back to normal. (Early Childhood Teachers Facebook member, Storypark, Postscript conversation, June 2020)

It was felt at setting two that Storypark was effective in supporting and even promoting individualised learning and communication with each family. Educators reported using Storypark to facilitate families' engagement in activities with their children while in isolation at home. One educator outlined the specific ways in which Storypark was used:

We are able to provide examples and lists of ideas and activities for families to do at home. It is a fine line between overwhelming them and giving them something to do with their child. They are not teachers, but we can give them some ideas and activities. We have all been making videos of things that are still happening at the centre, and with their friends that are still coming. Most children are at home. I try to think of things that I know might work that for an individual child and family. I use their interests to guide what activities I might suggest. It also depends a bit on whether mum and dad are also trying to work from home ... We have also uploaded videos of what is going on in the centre for those who are still coming. I think that the videos really help them [the children] stay connected with us, and their friends in such a strange time. I have had one mum tell me that her son has watched the video of us a trillion times! (setting two, Storypark, postscript conversation, June 2020)

The concept of children using Storypark to facilitate and maintain connections with educators and with settings was not something initially explored or uncovered in the data collection phase of this study, pre COVID-19. In fact, children's use of Storypark was not mentioned by educators in interviews or observations. Collaboration was solely discussed in terms of connections between educators and families. Interestingly though, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of Storypark by children appears to have increased. Storypark enabled children to collaborate and connect with other children, educators and the setting. Similarly, COVID-19 has also seen a change in the way that families are using Storypark, with increased communications originating from families. Future research into children's use of Storypark to facilitate collaboration between children may offer further insights and possibilities. The data collected in this study will provide an important foundation to what existed in pre COVID-19 education settings.

### **6.3 Facebook**

Through postscript conversations with educators and Facebook participants, it was reported that the use of Facebook had increased through the pandemic. According to educators from setting three, the use of Facebook during the pandemic increased exponentially, similar to that of Storypark. Setting three employed Facebook as the primary means of collaborating with families and delivering the kindergarten program in a virtual space. The following describes the ways in which Facebook was employed by educators in setting three:

We moved 100 per cent online for our kinder kids. We used FaceTime with individual children and families each session so that we could see their faces and they could see us. We sometimes did small group sessions where we read a story, and then we followed up with an activity. We scheduled individual FaceTime with each family just to check

in and see how things were going. It was a great way to still see their faces! (setting three, Facebook, postscript conversation, June 2020)

Similarly, members of the Early Childhood Teachers Facebook group also commented that their use of Facebook had increased throughout the pandemic. Members reported setting up new private Facebook groups whereby they could interact with children and families and deliver activities. That is, educators who had not previously engaged with Facebook in a professional context reported adopting Facebook as a means of connecting with children and families as it was easily accessible, free and commonly used:

I hadn't used it [Facebook] before with my group. But it all happened so quickly, and I didn't have time to look into other options. I thought that almost everyone has access to Facebook, so it would be a good way to reach out and stay connected. I'm not sure that I would say I am any expert, but I managed to run a few things with FaceTime. We did a few songs and stories. It has been so helpful. (Early Childhood Teachers Facebook member, Storypark, Postscript conversation, June 2020)

## **6.4 Concluding comments**

The way in which educators have responded to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and the move to the online delivery of education programs has been significant and exceptional. Through the pandemic, the educators and the profession as a whole demonstrated willingness and adaptability to ensure that families and children remain connected to their education setting; this is worthy of commendation and further research.

Regardless of the mode of social media used, all educators contacted for this postscript reported a significant increase in the use of social media. Or, in the case of setting one, a move away from email to that of a platform that offers increased functionality in terms of voice and video.

Similarly, all reported that either Storypark, Facebook or YouTube had been instrumental in engaging and staying connected with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of further interest is that no educators mentioned compliance, National Quality Standards or Assessment and Ratings in their discussions of technology and social media use during the pandemic. Their focus did not appear to be on compliance. Instead, connecting with families and maintaining relationships was seen as paramount. It is apparent, then, that in these unprecedented times, the use of social media has been advantageous and enabled learning and connections to continue to develop while isolation and physical distancing limited face-to-face opportunities. Perhaps, then, it could be said that COVID-19 has facilitated a new third space where using social media to collaborate with families is continually evolving.

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## 8 Appendices

## 8.1 Appendix A: Survey for educators

# Survey for educators

## Collaborative partnerships in early childhood

### Q1 Introduction

This study attempts to collect information about how educators collaborate with families in the early years setting.

**Procedures** The questionnaire consists of 11 questions and will take approximately 10 minutes or less. Questions are designed to determine how you currently collaborate with families in your early childhood setting.

**Confidentiality** All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect identity.

**Questions about the research** If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Professor Nicola Yelland at Victoria University, [nicola.yelland@vu.edu.au](mailto:nicola.yelland@vu.edu.au) or Eloise Thomson, [eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au](mailto:eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au). If you wish to participate in further research on the use of social media in collaborating with families please email Eloise Thomson. This research has been granted ethics approval.

Q2 How many years have you been working in early childhood education?

- ☐ Less than 5 years (1)
- ☐ 5–10 years (2)
- ☐ 10 or more years (3)

Q3 Has your workload increased, decreased or remained the same since the introduction of the NQS?

- ☐ Increased (1)
- ☐ Decreased (2)
- ☐ Remained the same (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 In what ways has your workload increased and/or decreased?

Q5 What is your interpretation of the term collaborative practice with families?

Q6 How do you currently collaborate with families?

Q7 What do you see as the biggest challenges in collaborating with families?

Q8 What forms of technology do you currently use on a daily basis (professionally or personally)?

- ☐ Email (1)
- ☐ YouTube (2)
- ☐ Facebook (3)
- ☐ Twitter (4)
- ☐ Instagram (5)
- ☐ WhatsApp (6)
- ☐ Pinterest (7)
- ☐ WeChat (8)
- ☐ Other (9) \_\_\_\_\_

Q9 What forms of technology do you currently use on a daily basis as part of your role as an educator?

- ☐ Email (1)
- ☐ YouTube (2)
- ☐ Facebook (3)
- ☐ Twitter (4)
- ☐ Instagram (5)
- ☐ WhatsApp (6)
- ☐ Pinterest (7)
- ☐ WeChat (8)
- ☐ Other (9) \_\_\_\_\_

Q10 Do you currently use any form of social media to collaborate with families?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Email (3)
- ☐ YouTube (4)
- ☐ Facebook (5)
- ☐ Twitter (6)
- ☐ Instagram (7)
- ☐ WhatsApp (8)
- ☐ Pinterest (9)
- ☐ WeChat (10)
- ☐ Other (11)

Q11 Please read and respond to the following questions, rating them from strongly agree to strongly disagree

|                                                                            | Strongly<br>agree (1)    | Agree<br>(2)             | Somewhat<br>agree (3)    | Neither<br>agree nor<br>disagree<br>(4) | Somewhat<br>disagree<br>(5) | Disagree<br>(6)          | Strongly<br>disagree<br>(7) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I feel comfortable using social media (1)                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| I feel at ease learning about social media (2)                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| I can see a benefit in using social media to collaborate with families (3) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| I feel comfortable using social media to collaborate with families (4)     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| I find engaging with parents a difficult part of my role (5)               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| Parents are too busy to communicate face-to-face (6)                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| Access to parents is an issue in collaborating (7)                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |
| Collaborating with families is integral in my programming (8)              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>                | <input type="checkbox"/>    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>    |

|                                                                                                           |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Collaborating with families takes up too much time in my working week (9)                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I value the role of families in contributing to my program (10)                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I provide a variety of ways all families can contribute (11)                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am happy with the level of family involvement in my program (12)                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I could be collaborating with families better (13)                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| With sufficient training and support I think social media could help me to collaborate with families (14) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q12 Would you be interested in being part of further research looking at the use of social media to collaborate with families?

If yes, can you please provide your contact details (email or phone) below? so that the researcher can contact you, or send an email to [eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au](mailto:eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au)

☐

Yes (1) \_\_\_\_\_

☐

Maybe (2)

☐

No (3)

## 8.2 Appendix B: Survey for families

# Survey for families

## Collaborative practice

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### Introduction

This study attempts to collect information about how you currently collaborate with the educators at the setting your child attends.

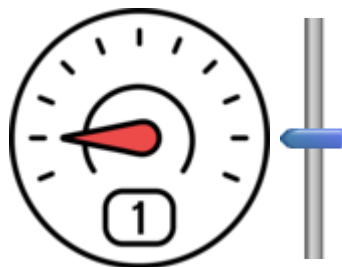
Procedures The questionnaire consists of 10 questions and will take approximately 5 minutes or less.

Confidentiality All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect identity.

Questions about the research If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Professor Nicola Yelland at Victoria University, [nicola.yelland@vu.edu.au](mailto:nicola.yelland@vu.edu.au) or Eloise Thomson, [eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au](mailto:eloise.thomson@live.vu.edu.au). This research has ethics approval.

---

Q1 One a scale of 1–10, how important do you think it is for you to collaborate with your child's early childhood centre?



0 (0)

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

5 (5)

6 (6)

7 (7)

8 (8)

9 (9)

10 (10)

---

Q2 How do you interact with your child's centre?

- ☐ Phone conversations (1)
  - ☐ Email (2)
  - ☐ Face-to-face (pick up & drop off) (3)
  - ☐ Text messages (4)
  - ☐ Social media (5)
  - ☐ Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q3 Are you satisfied with the level of collaboration you have with your child's setting?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ I would like more interaction (3)
- ☐ I would like less interaction (4)

Q4 What forms of technology do you currently use on a daily basis (professionally or personally)?

☐

Email (1)

☐

YouTube (2)

☐

Facebook (3)

☐

Twitter (4)

☐

Instagram (5)

☐

WhatsApp (6)

☐

Pinterest (7)

☐

WeChat (8)

☐

Other (9) \_\_\_\_\_

Q5 Do you use any of the following to interact with your child's centre?

- ☐ Email (1)
- ☐ YouTube (2)
- ☐ Facebook (3)
- ☐ Twitter (4)
- ☐ Instagram (5)
- ☐ WhatsApp (6)
- ☐ Text Messages (7)
- ☐ StoryPark (8)
- ☐ Other (9)
- ☐ What do you prefer about this form of communication? (10)

Q6 How valuable do you find the following?

|                                        | Not valuable (1)         | Somewhat valuable (2)    | Very valuable (3)        |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Reading newsletters (1)                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Face-to-face conversations (2)         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attending working bees (3)             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Being a parent or special helper (4)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Use of social media to communicate (5) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

---

Q7 How do you contribute to the conversation or communication via social media (comments, feedback or like etc.)?

---

Q8 Can you suggest anything that would make collaborating with the centre easier or more convenient for you?

---

Q9 Do you have any concerns about the use of social media to communicate?

---

Q10 Do you have any feedback for the centre on how they are collaborating with families?

## **8.3 Appendix C: One-on-one interviews**

### **Case study site discussion prompts for one-on-one interviews with educators**

#### **Collaboration**

Can you tell me more about how you collaborate with families?

Is this centre wide?

What practices do you find are working well?

What do you see as some of the issues in collaborating with families?

#### **Social media (SM)**

Are you using any SM with families?

What made you think of using SM?

Do you follow any guidelines for best practice?

Do you find many of your families adopt using SM?

How do you cater for those using SM/not using SM?

How does SM impact on your workload?

How do you think the use of SM impacts the quality of the interactions/collaboration with families?

What do you see as the barriers to using SM?

What do you see as the reasons for adopting SM?

What do you see as the reasons against using SM?

## 8.4 Appendix D: Secondary survey

# Using social media in early childhood settings

Q1 What social media (including programs or apps) are you using in your setting?

Q2 How have you used social media to engage or promote open communication with families?

Q3 Has social media influenced your workload? Increased/decreased – how?

Q4 How do you think the use of social media has affected collaborative partnerships at your centre?

Q5 Have you implemented any guiding principles (rules or practices) in how social media is used at your centre?

Q6 What do you see as the enablers and inhibitors of using social media?

Q7 Do you have any recommendations on how to best use social media with families?

Q8 How does using social media change the nature of the relationship between parents and teachers?

Q9 How does SM (and indeed ICT in general) change the nature of teachers' work?

## 8.5 Appendix E: Ethics approval

28 February 2019

### To whom it may concern

This letter is to confirm that Ms Eloise Thomson has a lapsed status in the Doctor of Philosophy with the Institute of Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities at Victoria University on 23 March 2018.

02/03/2015 (Part-time) 24/03/2024

9/08/2016

31/08/2016

86 HD 86 H1 Lapsed 1.50

Ms Thomson has taken a total intermission of 22 days during her enrolment.

If you have any queries regarding this matter, please email our office at

[GradResearch@vu.edu.au](mailto:GradResearch@vu.edu.au) Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Smith

Manager,

VU Research Graduate Research Admissions & Candidature Office for Researcher Training,

Quality and Integrity

Victoria University

VU Research  
Office for Researcher Training, Quality and Integrity FOOTSCRAY PARK CAMPUS  
PO BOX 14428 MELBOURNE  
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PHONE +61 3 9919 4522 [gradresearch@vu.edu.au](mailto:gradresearch@vu.edu.au)  
[vu.edu.au](http://vu.edu.au)



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Smith', written in a cursive style.

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY ABN 83776954731 CRICOS Provider No. 00124K (Melbourne), 02475D (Sydney)

## 8.6 Appendix F: Consent for educators

# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH – for educators

### INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting’. You have been identified as being interested in taking part in this research from an initial email survey that you completed.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

This study seeks to gain insights into the ways in which social media is being used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families. The overarching research question is: How does the use of social media provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting?

The research involves an initial survey to assess current practice and further discussion in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss how you use social media with families in your setting. If you are currently using a social media application such as Facebook or an ‘app’ you may like to provide the researcher access to this as part of the research.

### CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I, "[Click here & type participant's name]"

of "[Click here & type participant's suburb]"

Certify that I am at least 18 years old\* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting.’ This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Eloise Thomson, PhD student, Victoria University

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

1. Complete an online survey about the ways in which you currently collaborate with families.
2. Participate in a semi-structured 30-minute interview to further discuss how you currently collaborate with families and how you use social media with families in your early years setting.
3. Share examples of social media applications used, that will be recorded via NCapture.
4. Share experiences and examples of practice through informal discussions with the researcher for a period of approximately 6 weeks.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential and will be stored on a password protected computer. Data collected may be used for professional conferences and scholarly publications. Data will be destroyed after 5 years as per Victoria University guidelines.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher.

Professor Nicola Yelland, Victoria University

03 9919 4904

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email [Researchethics@vu.edu.au](mailto:Researchethics@vu.edu.au) or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

## 8.7 Appendix G: Consent for families

# CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH – for families

### INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting’. You have been identified as possibly being interested in taking part in this research by educators within the early childhood setting your family attends.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

This study seeks to gain insights into the ways in which social media is being used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families. The overarching research question is: How does the use of social media provide new opportunities for enhancing collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting?

The research involves an initial survey to assess current practice and further discussion in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss how you use social media with families in your setting. If you are currently using a social media application such as Facebook or an app’ you may like to provide the researcher access to this as part of the research.

### CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I, "[Click here & type participant's name]"

of "[Click here & type participant's suburb]"

Certify that I am at least 18 years old\* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting.’ This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Eloise Thomson, PhD student, Victoria University

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

1. Complete an online survey about the ways in which you currently collaborate with educators within your early childhood setting.
2. Share examples of social media applications used, that will be recorded via NCapture. Data will be made non-identifiable.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential and will be stored on a password protected computer. Data collected may be used for professional conferences and scholarly publications. Data will be destroyed after 5 years as per Victoria University guidelines.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher.

Professor Nicola Yelland, Victoria University

03 99194904

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email [Researchethics@vu.edu.au](mailto:Researchethics@vu.edu.au) or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

## 8.8 Appendix H: Example of interview transcript

Example of transcript from interview

R = respondent

I = interviewer

CODES:

Red = informing, disseminating information

Purple = reciprocal, two-way communication

Blue = monitoring, analytics

Orange = time, fast, immediate

I: Can you just tell me a little bit about collaborative practice, and what it means to you?

R: **Respectful** practice. **Reciprocal** ideas. Sharing and work as a team with families and everyone at the centre.

I: In what ways do you collaborate here at your centre?

R: We collaborate on all kinds of levels from working on the QIP, parents have the opportunity to input into policies and procedures, day-to-day practices, involvement in curriculum development and the way we do our programming. Goal setting for both the children and the centre. We have **newsletters** but we have moved away as much we can from paper-based communication but we did find that was the best way of getting information to the majority of our families. We do use Schoolbag which is an app but it doesn't work so well with Android phones. FB is another way that we are continuing with but not everyone has FB. So, finding a universal method to collaborate and get **information out** is a challenge. We are moving away from Kidsoft which was the system we were utilising as one of the major drawbacks on that one in getting information out to everyone is that you add a few lines of text to the bottom of their account summary sheet. Which is not a nice way to do it.

I: So, Kidsoft is mainly a financial type of application?

R: Yes, it is about each family's account and working out the childcare rebates/benefits etc.

R: We are transitioning into App which means that the families can log in and can write up medication forms and absentees and access policies procedures, excursion forms, their child's' individual records etc. It is going to be a far better and beneficial way of communicating with families.

I: Is that an app?

R: Yes. it is on their phone – all types of phones.

I: Is that individual or whole group?

R: It is individual but allows for groups, so each room can set up groups and send our communications such as notices and newsletters and that goes to each family in that room. We can **see which families have opened it**, which families haven't opened it. **We can see two out of those** five families haven't actually read it so then we can follow up face-to-face if that is relevant.

I: So, you are transitioning into that app?

R: Yes.

I: In what other ways do you think you will use the app?

R: individual records. So, **it is real-time stuff**. The programming will be done into the kids' app so each room will have their own area and they do programming on there. So, families can see it as it is done and can feedback.

I: When families comment – is that something that everyone can see or just the individual teacher?

R; Oh, good point – I'm not sure. I'll have to look.

I: What do you see as the challenges of collaborating with families?

R: Ensuring that everyone gets the same message at the same **time**. so, having 35 staff we have staff meetings but ensuring that every staff member is working to our philosophy, our policy and procedures and of course interpretation of common messages. As a staff we may have a message we **want to get out to families** – we have all kinds of families and it is important that we communicate effectively with all families.

I: Can you expand a little on what you mean by that?

R: In situations where families say to staff – please don't let my child sleep at all ... the child might be 6 months old and are falling asleep while having lunch ... so, respecting the family's wishes while our duty of care to that child is our first priority. So, as a staff we want to put out common messages about our priority to children and ensuring children's health and wellbeing. We do this in a really positive manner and messages can be consistent across a range of staff and families.

I: Another thing that has come up is how families value the concept of collaboration with EC centres – has this come up for you?

R: Most definitely. Personally, it has been a difficulty especially in a long day care centre where some of the families have that opinion of – I pay you, just do it, I don't want to know ... even to the point of looking at portfolios or giving day-to-day feedback on what their child has been doing and they are kind of – fine ... whatever, I pay you, just do it. So, it is the trust in what we do – but don't explain it to me, I don't have time. Valuing EC education is something I have tried not to soapbox too much but I do throw it into newsletters or the FB page every now and then. In the children's portfolios quite often, there are blurbs about children's play and respectful practice and things like that.

I: The EY Frameworks talks about educators supporting families in their parenting role – what do you think about your role in that?

R: It is a tricky one. Obviously we support ... it is a fine line. We don't want to set ourselves up as the experts on parenting and every child related issue ... I think we are very good in supporting families when they ask for help and offering help if we feel that there is a need ... but stepping back if their answer is a no. We need to get back into having PD sessions that are open to everyone and giving them options on other directions in they are looking for more help ... it is just a **time thing** ... never enough time. For them and us ...

I: We have talked about a few different SM forms – what led you to give SM ago?

R: Just trying to find the best ways to collaborate with families and support them... an avenue for **reciprocal** relationships ... I'm very comfortable with FB, there are other apps that other teachers use ... like SkoolBag etc ...

I: What kind of things do you use FB for?

R: **Information sharing** regarding events, fundraising, releases from DET, recalls on safety products, anything we think would be of value to our families.

I: Is it one for the whole centre?

R: Each room has their own FB page ... not every room uses it though. we also have a centre one.

I: Why do you think some use it and some don't?

R: I guess it is reviewed on an annual basis so if families aren't engaging with it then it isn't the best way to engage with that year's families and they try other methods.

I: Are they closed, private FB pages?

R: Yes, to ensure [confidentially](#) and things like photos ... parents sign a permission and release form. Parents can then download the photos etc ...

I: Do you find that many parents contribute or comment on the FB pages?

R: It depends on the year. Some years very much so, some not so much ...

I: How many of your families use the SM apps or FB group?

R: Fairly high – across the board at least 80 per cent and we use paper-based or email for other families.

I: Do you think SM adds to your workload?

R: I think it makes communication more streamlined and it is a one stop process that reaches the maximum number of families. So, in some respects it lessens the workload ... if I [can see that 27/35](#) people have accessed the information then I only need to face-to-face the others who haven't ...

There may be additional workload in setting something up, like our new app, but then when we review it and ask families if it is working for them and how they feel in the collaboration process then it will actually lessen the load.

I: Have you had any issues or challenges in using SM here?

R: We haven't had any issues like trolling or negativity which is great. I am hopeful because that is because of our philosophy in the centre on respectful practice and our environment. I have heard that in other centres it has been a forum for negativity and complaints and concerns but this not been an issue for us.

## 8.9 Appendix I: Information for participants

# INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH – for educators

### **You are invited to participate**

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You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting’. You have been identified as being interested in taking part in this research from an initial email survey that you completed.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

### **Project explanation**

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With 1.44 billion Facebook users in 2015, social media has become a worldwide phenomenon. This research looks at how social media is being used to build collaborative partnerships between educators and families in the early years setting. This study seeks to gain insights into the ways in which social media is used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

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If you consent to being part of this case study you will be asked to:

1. Complete a survey about the ways in which you currently collaborate with families.
2. Participate in a semi-structured 30-minute interview to further discuss how you currently collaborate with families and how you use social media with families in your early years setting.
3. Show examples of social media applications used.
4. Share experiences and examples of practice through informal discussions with the researcher for a period of approximately 6 weeks.

### **What will I gain from participating?**

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By participating in this research your practices will help to determine the best ways in which to use social media with families in building collaborative partnerships.

All information will be treated as confidential and individual participants will not be identified in the PhD thesis, conference presentations or publications without their permission.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you do not have to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

### **How will the information I give be used?**

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This research will be used to inform and make recommendations on using social media with families. It may contribute to the academic debate or be used in scholarly articles for early childhood educators.

**What are the potential risks of participating in this project?**

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There is limited risk associated with this research.

**How will this project be conducted?**

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This research will be conducted via a survey to early childhood educators gaining a picture of current practice in the ways in which they currently collaborate with families. From this survey three case study sites will be determined and educators in those settings will be interviewed to further explore the way they collaborate with families. Social media sites or 'apps' will be examined and educators will share examples and stories of what works well for them.

**Who is conducting the study?**

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Professor Nicola Yelland – College of Education, Victoria University  
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Associate Investigator  
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Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email [researchethics@vu.edu.au](mailto:researchethics@vu.edu.au) or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

## 8.10 Appendix J: Information for families

# INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH – for families

### **You are invited to participate**

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You are invited to participate in a research project entitled ‘A case study on the role of social media in building collaborative partnerships with families in the early years setting’. You have been identified as possibly being interested in taking part in this research by educators within the early childhood setting your family attends.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher Eloise Thomson as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Nicola Yelland and Professor Mindy Blaise from the College of Education at Victoria University.

### **Project explanation**

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With 1.44 billion Facebook users in 2015, social media has become a worldwide phenomenon. This research looks at how social media is being used to build collaborative partnerships between educators and families in the early years setting. This study seeks to gain insights into the ways in which social media is used to engage and promote open communication and collaboration with families.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

---

If you consent to being part of this case study you will be asked to:

1. Complete a survey about the ways in which you communicate with your early childhood centre. This survey will ask about how often you communicate, how you communicate, and your experiences of using social media with the early childhood setting.
2. Give permission for social media sites/pages or applications to be recorded using a software package called NCapture. Your contributions to social media sites or applications will remain anonymous and you will not be personally identifiable in any of the data. Pseudonyms may be used to ensure confidentiality.

### **What will I gain from participating?**

---

By participating in this research your practices will help to determine the best ways in which to use social media with families in building collaborative partnerships.

All information will be treated as confidential and individual participants will not be identified in the PhD thesis, conference presentations or publications without their permission.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you do not have to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

### **How will the information I give be used?**

---

This research will be used to inform and make recommendations on using social media with families. It may contribute to the academic debate or be used in scholarly articles for early childhood educators.

**What are the potential risks of participating in this project?**

---

There is limited risk associated with this research.

**How will this project be conducted?**

---

This research will be conducted via a survey to early childhood educators gaining a picture of current practice in the ways in which educators and families currently collaborate. From this survey three case study sites will be determined and educators in those settings will be interviewed to further explore the way they collaborate with families. Social media sites or 'apps' will be examined and educators will share examples and stories of what works well for them.

**Who is conducting the study?**

---

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