An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year-olds

Nicole Downes
Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University
Faculty of Arts and Education

October 2016
I am the author of the thesis entitled:

An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year-olds

submitted for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis may be made available for consultation, loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: Nicole Downes

Signed: Signature Redacted by Library

Date: 19/12/2016
Candidate Declaration

I certify the following about the thesis entitled ‘An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year-olds’ submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy:

- I am the creator of all or part of the whole work(s) (including content and layout) and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

- The work(s) are not in any way a violation or infringement of any copyright, trademark, patent, or other rights whatsoever of any person.

- That if the work(s) have been commissioned, sponsored or supported by any organisation, I have fulfilled all of the obligations required by such contract or agreement.

- That any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

- All research integrity requirements have been complied with.

‘I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct’

Full Name: Nicole Downes

Signed: Signature Redacted by Library

Date: 20/10/2016
Abstract

This study aimed to investigate educator-child relationship and wellbeing levels of children from birth to 3 years old in regional Australia. Factors that influence educator-child relationships were also examined. In contemporary Australian early childhood education and care settings, the educator-child relationship is an important indicator of quality (ACECQA, 2013b). The importance of a positive educator-child relationship cannot be overstated, as it supports the child’s brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), social development (Howes & Ritchie, 2002) and academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Moreover, positive educator-child relationships inform children’s sense of belonging, and contribute to a positive sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009). These reasons provided the impetus for undertaking this research project, as it is both important and timely to determine the quality of children’s relationship with their educators.

In order to identify educator-child relationship and wellbeing levels of the sample, a case study approach was adopted, using mixed methods. Quantitative data was collected using systematic observation scales. A total of 92 educator-child relationships were rated using the Reflect Respect Relate Relationship Scale, and the Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing scale was used to rate children’s wellbeing (N = 92) (DECS, 2008). Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations, in order to determine factors that contributed to educator-child relationship levels of the sample.
It was found that children from birth to 3 years old have satisfactory relationship with their educators, mostly based on direct contact in the educational settings, with a focus on responding to children’s physical needs. Factors that were found to influence the educator-child relationship included responsiveness, interactions, child characteristics, educator characteristics, educator-parent relationships, attendance rate in ECEC settings per week, the development of trust and children’s behaviour. Children’s wellbeing levels were found to be high, and a significant correlation was found between educator-child relationship levels and child wellbeing levels of the sample.

Recommendations for policy, practice and further research are presented at the conclusion of this thesis.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to

My children - Kyle, Xavier and Aaliyah

To illustrate to my children the value of education, and that you can achieve anything if you set a goal, work hard and never give up!
Acknowledgments

There have been several people who have provided me with support and encouragement throughout my PhD journey that I would like to acknowledge.

My supervisors and Deakin University

Bonnie. I cannot begin to describe the amazing influence Bonnie has had over my life. From the very start she was kind, supportive and encouraging of my abilities. She presented me with an opportunity far beyond my expectations, and helped me in every way to achieve my goals. I have learnt so much from Bonnie over the years. I am thankful for her wonderful supervision and friendship.

Louise. She was such a comforting presence throughout my journey, that I always felt safe and secure. Her knowledge and guidance were an incredible gift to me, and I am thankful for her time, support and friendship.

Bernadette. I am always grateful for the times we shared discussing ideas; ideas that changed my way of thinking. Bernadette provided me with such support and guidance that my journey was always positive. I am thankful for her time, support and friendship.

The Faculty of Arts and Education and Higher Degree by Research staff have provided tremendous support and encouragement throughout my journey, which contributed greatly to the completion of my thesis.
My father and mother

My father has always been my hero, from as early as I can remember. His presence and influence has always guided me towards knowledge, legacy and happiness. Through him I have learnt many valuable lessons, including the importance of family and education. I thank him for the countless hours of stimulating conversation that furthered my thinking, and the love and support he so freely gave me throughout my life.

My mother has also inspired me throughout my life. A strong woman with a great sense of humour, she could always keep me balanced and allowed my inner child to shine through in times of struggle. I thank her for being an incredibly empowering role model and friend.

My friend Natalie

Throughout this journey, I was lucky enough to find a companion. Natalie was a source of positivity, support and friendship that made this journey enjoyable. I will always cherish the fun memories and experiences we have shared together, and look forward to campaigning for young children throughout our careers.

Participants

I would like to acknowledge and thank the early childhood education and care settings, educators, children and their families for their generous participation in the current study.
# Table of Contents

**Full Name:** Nicole Downes ................................................................. ii

**Date:** 19/12/2016 .................................................................................. ii

**LIST OF FIGURES** ................................................................................ XV

**LIST OF TABLES** .................................................................................. XVII

**LIST OF VIGNETTES** ............................................................................ XIX

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** .................................................................... XXII

## CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

1.1 Background and purpose ...................................................................... 3

1.1.1 Relationships .................................................................................. 6

1.1.2 Wellbeing ....................................................................................... 7

1.1.3 Children from birth to 3 years old .................................................. 9

1.1.4 Quality ECEC .................................................................................. 10

1.1.5 Research location – Regional Victoria, Australia .......................... 14

1.1.6 Purpose statement .......................................................................... 17

1.2 Significance of the research .................................................................. 17

1.3 Theory .................................................................................................. 20

1.3.1 Attachment theory ......................................................................... 20

1.3.2 Ecological systems theory ................................................................ 21

1.4 Methodology ......................................................................................... 22

1.5 Research questions .............................................................................. 23

1.6 Definition of key terms ........................................................................ 25

1.7 Thesis Structure ................................................................................... 26

1.8 Summary of Chapter 1 ......................................................................... 27

## CHAPTER 2  LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................... 28

2.1 Relationships ....................................................................................... 29

2.1.1 Educator-child relationships ......................................................... 32
3.2 Conceptual framework .......................................................... 146
3.3 Theoretical framework .......................................................... 149
  3.3.1 Pragmatist paradigm ......................................................... 150
3.4 Research Design ................................................................... 155
  3.4.1 Research methods ............................................................ 156
3.5 Research instruments ............................................................ 160
  3.5.1 Quantitative ................................................................ 161
  3.5.2 Qualitative ................................................................. 175
3.6 Sample ................................................................................. 179
  3.6.1 ECEC settings ............................................................... 180
  3.6.2 Participants ................................................................. 181
3.7 Ethics .................................................................................... 183
3.8 Data analysis ......................................................................... 185
  3.8.1 Research question 1 ....................................................... 186
  3.8.2 Research question 2 ....................................................... 187
  3.8.3 Research question 3 ....................................................... 189
  3.8.4 Research question 4 ....................................................... 190
3.9 Summary of Chapter 3 ............................................................ 190

CHAPTER 4  FINDINGS ................................................................... 192
4.1 RQ1 - What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings? 193
  4.1.1 Aim .............................................................................. 193
  4.1.2 Levels of educator-child relationships ................................ 195
  4.1.3 Summary of RQ1 ............................................................ 270
4.2 RQ 2 - What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings? 271
  4.2.1 Aim .............................................................................. 271
4.2.2 Educators’ perspectives on educator-child relationships ........ 272
4.2.3 Factors that influence educator child relationships .............. 275
4.2.4 Summary of RQ2 findings ........................................... 303

4.3 RQ3 – What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings? .... 304
4.3.1 Aim .............................................................................. 304
4.3.2 Child wellbeing level .................................................... 305
4.3.3 Summary of RQ 3 ......................................................... 324

4.4 RQ 4 – What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings? ....................................................... 325
4.4.1 Aim .............................................................................. 325
4.4.2 Links between educator-child relationship level and child wellbeing level .................................................................................. 325
4.4.3 Summary of RQ4 ........................................................... 328

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION ........................................................................ 329
5.1 Discussion of RQ 1 ................................................................. 330
5.1.1 Key findings ..................................................................... 330
5.1.2 Levels of educator-child relationships .......................... 331
5.1.3 Summary of RQ1 discussion ........................................... 346

5.2 Discussion of RQ 2 ................................................................. 347
5.2.1 Key findings ..................................................................... 347
5.2.2 External factors ............................................................... 348
5.2.3 Child characteristics ....................................................... 356
5.2.4 Educator characteristics .................................................. 365
5.2.5 Summary of RQ2 Discussion ........................................... 372
5.3 Discussion of RQ3 ................................................................. 373
5.3.1 Key finding ........................................................................ 373
5.3.2 Levels of child wellbeing .................................................. 373
5.3.3 Summary of RQ3 discussion ............................................. 382

5.4 Discussion of RQ4 ................................................................. 383
5.4.1 Key finding ........................................................................ 383
5.4.2 Relationship and wellbeing correlation .............................. 383
5.4.3 Summary of RQ4 Discussion ............................................. 385

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION ............................................................ 386
6.1 Educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year old .... 387
6.2 Recommendations ................................................................. 389
6.2.1 For policy ........................................................................... 389
6.2.2 For practice ......................................................................... 390
6.2.3 For further research ............................................................ 394

6.3 Limitations and strengths of the research ............................... 396
6.3.1 Limitations ......................................................................... 396
6.3.2 Strengths ............................................................................ 401

6.4 Summary of Chapter 6 .......................................................... 405

REFERENCE LIST ........................................................................ 406

APPENDICES ............................................................................... 434
Appendix A – DEECD ethics approval ........................................ 435
Appendix B – HEAG ethics approval .......................................... 436
Appendix C – Third party consent form ..................................... 438
Appendix D – Participant consent form ...................................... 439
Appendix E – Organisation consent form .................................... 440
Appendix F – Semi-structured interview questions ............... 442
Appendix G – Naturalistic Observation template ..................... 444
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>White’s multidimensional approach to wellbeing</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>ECE risk and protective factors of child wellbeing</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Hierarchy of human needs</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Child’s inner working model</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Four phases of attachment</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Circle of Security</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Structural and process quality</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>NQS quality areas</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>EYLF principles</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>EYLF practices</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>EYLF practices</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>Elements that influence child relationships</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>Visualisation of components of trust</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>Temperament types</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Conceptual framework</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Paradigms and approaches to research</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Research design and process</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Research paradigms and instruments</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Sleep information, Setting 1</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Allergy information, Setting 1</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.3: The influence of the number of days children attended the ECEC setting on educator-child relationship levels, as measured by the RRRRS ........................................278

Figure 4.4: Internalised and externalised behaviours exhibited by children .................291
List of Tables

Table 2.1: Attachment classification descriptions ......................................................... 74
Table 2.2: NQS quality area 5 description ........................................................................ 96
Table 2.3: Factors that influence child relationships ......................................................... 102
Table 2.4: Factors that influence child relationships ......................................................... 103
Table 2.5: Description of parenting styles ........................................................................ 126
Table 3.1: Data integration ............................................................................................... 160
Table 3.2: Descriptions of the four RRRRS signals ......................................................... 167
Table 3.3: Indicators of the RRRRS signals ...................................................................... 168
Table 3.4: RRRRS indicator descriptors .......................................................................... 169
Table 3.5: RRRRS rating descriptors ................................................................................ 170
Table 3.6: Description of the RRRWS signals .................................................................. 171
Table 3.7: Indicators of the RRRWS signals .................................................................... 172
Table 3.8: RRRWS indicator descriptors .......................................................................... 174
Table 3.9: RRRWS rating descriptors ............................................................................... 174
Table 3.10: Diploma qualification type descriptor ............................................................ 181
Table 3.11: Analysis techniques ....................................................................................... 185
Table 4.1: Research questions and corresponding methods .............................................. 193
Table 4.2: RRRS rating descriptions ................................................................................ 194
Table 4.3: Educator-child RRRRS signal levels ................................................................. 197
Table 4.4: Factors found to influence educator-child relationships .................................... 272
Table 4.5: Factors identified by educators during semi-structured interviews as influencing educator-child relationships ................................................................................................. 276
Table 4.6: ECEC daily routine .......................................................................................... 283
Table 4.7: Factors found to influence educator-child relationships ..................303
Table 4.8: RRRWS rating descriptions.................................................................305
Table 4.9: Levels of children RRRWS level...........................................................307
Table 4.10: RRRRS signals influencing RRRRWS levels......................................326
Table 5.1: Factors found to influence educator-child relationships .....................348
Table 6.1: Managing insider research issues..........................................................398
List of Vignettes

Vignette 1.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 1 ................................................................. 1
Vignette 2.1 – Personal reflection journey: Part 2 .............................................................. 28
Vignette 4.1 A personal reflection journey: Part 3 .............................................................. 192
Vignette 4.2 Response to child injury ................................................................................. 200
Vignette 4.3 Non-responsive to attachment behaviours ....................................................... 201
Vignette 4.4 Educator absence ......................................................................................... 205
Vignette 4.5 Educator tea-break ....................................................................................... 205
Vignette 4.6 Educator-child cuddles ................................................................................... 207
Vignette 4.7 Educators’ conversation and distractions ....................................................... 208
Vignette 4.8 Toilet time ..................................................................................................... 209
Vignette 4.9 Hairdressers ................................................................................................. 211
Vignette 4.10 Helpful and comforting ............................................................................... 214
Vignette 4.11 Left crying in the highchair ......................................................................... 215
Vignette 4.12 Superficial conflict support ......................................................................... 215
Vignette 4.13 Social sandpit play ....................................................................................... 220
Vignette 4.14 Brief educator-child playtime .................................................................... 221
Vignette 4.15 Behaviour guidance ..................................................................................... 222
Vignette 4.16 Controlling approach to behaviour .............................................................. 223
Vignette 4.17 Avoiding attachment behaviours ................................................................. 223
Vignette 4.18 Nurturing embrace ....................................................................................... 225
Vignette 4.19 Attachment behaviour denied ...................................................................... 226
Vignette 4.20 Transition time ............................................................................................ 227
Vignette 4.21 Educator joins in play experience ................................................................. 228
Vignette 4.47 Educator walks away ................................................................. 294
Vignette 4.48 Child exploration ........................................................................ 309
Vignette 4.49 Sharing humour ........................................................................ 312
Vignette 4.50 Social experience ....................................................................... 316
Vignette 4.51 Assertive behaviours .................................................................. 318
Vignette 4.52 Drop-off distress ......................................................................... 319
Vignette 4.53 Brief departure causes upset ........................................................ 327
Vignette 5.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 4 ............................................... 329
Vignette 6.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 5 ............................................... 386
## List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Variance</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Education and Care</td>
<td>ECEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years Learning Framework</td>
<td>EYLF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Quality Framework</td>
<td>NQS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Quality Standards</td>
<td>NQF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect Respect Relate Relationship Scale</td>
<td>RRRRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing Scales</td>
<td>RRRWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1 Introduction

Vignette 1.1 sets the scene for the research issue, and aimed to enable the reader to construct a clear image of the complex nature of educator-child relationships. Chapters that begin with a personal reflection journey vignette aim to enliven the text narrative and provide unique insights into educator-child relationships. The introductory vignettes are not data from the current study, but rather a creative amalgamation of the researcher’s educator-child relationship experiences over her nine years teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. It was these types of interactions between educators and children that was the impetus for this research.

Vignette 1.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 1

The early childhood setting is buzzing with the vigour of youthful play. I quietly walk around the room, observing the children as they engage in a variety of activities. The two-year-old age group has always been my favourite, as I enjoy supporting the development of children’s independence and autonomy, and watching their personalities shine through. I hear the door open, and turn towards the door as Charlotte enters the room with her mother. I immediately smile and feel delighted at the presence of the child. I walk straight to the door and bend down to Charlotte’s level to greet her. ‘Hi Charlotte!’ I say. Charlotte smiles widely and leans forward to embrace me, reciprocating the affection in my greeting. We both engage in playful banter about Charlotte’s new dress, and we discuss what she would like to do today in the ECEC setting. I then start an upbeat conversation with Charlotte’s mother about relevant matters before she leaves. Charlotte waves goodbye to her mother as we walk hand-in-hand to the book corner. In the book corner, Charlotte selects a book, and cosies up onto my knee; we start to read the book together. I can’t help but reflect on how much I genuinely care for Charlotte, and how much I enjoy her company. Moments later, I hear the door open again. I see Rebecca walk through the door alongside her mother. I instantly feel a pang of resentment that Rebecca has interrupted my interaction with
Charlotte, but, dutifully, I move Charlotte off my knee and walk over to Rebecca and her mother. I bend down to Rebecca’s level and attempt to engage in conversation with her, as is my normal approach to greeting children in the ECEC setting, although I recognise that my attempt to engage with Rebecca is insincere. Rebecca does not respond, and instead looks around the room. I am used to this response from Rebecca, and so I give up on interacting with Rebecca, and instead focus my attention on her mother, to gain handover information. My conversation with Rebecca’s mother is brief, as usual, and before long she is walking out of the door. Rebecca walks over to the book corner and sits alongside Charlotte. Rebecca selects a book and holds it out to me, signalling her desire to have me read this book to her. Again, I feel a pang of resentment, as I wanted to return to the book I was reading with Charlotte. ‘I am reading this book with Charlotte, so you will need to wait until I am finished and then I can read that book to you.’ I take the book Rebecca offered me and rest it on my knee as I sit down next to Charlotte. Instinctively, I pull Charlotte back on to my knee and continue to read the book from earlier. Rebecca waits and listens to Charlotte’s book for a minute, but before long she loses interest and walks away; I feel relieved, as now I can spend one-on-one time with Charlotte. I become easily frustrated with Rebecca, for reasons I cannot quite articulate; I just cannot seem to connect with her. It makes me wonder – why do I have a positive relationship with some children, and not with others? I reflect on my recent interactions with Charlotte and Rebecca—due to my feelings of connectedness to Charlotte and disconnectedness to Rebecca, one child is receiving quality interactions and responsiveness from myself, while the other has missed out on this opportunity and is now wandering aimlessly around the room. It occurs to me that the quality of my relationships with individual children could be having a powerful impact on the child’s learning and wellbeing. I feel a pang of guilt – how can I rectify this situation? What factors are contributing to my relationships with young children, and can they be improved?

The current study investigated the educator-child relationship of 92 children from birth to 3 years old and their educator, in five ECEC settings located in a regional area of Victoria, Australia. Factors that could influence the levels of
educator-child relationships were also examined. Furthermore, the current study investigated children’s levels of wellbeing, and then examined if there was a link between educator-child relationships and children’s levels of wellbeing. The current study used a mixed methods approach within a case study, employing measurement scales, semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations to gather data that would comprehensively answer four research questions (see Chapter 3 for further details).

Chapter 1 provides the reader with background information on the research issue and describes the purpose of the current study. The significance of the current study is outlined, which identifies how this research provides comprehensive understandings and new knowledge to the field of ECEC. The research questions are then presented, as well as a brief overview of the methodological approach and theoretical perspectives, concluding with definitions of key terms used throughout the thesis and a chapter summary.

1.1 Background and purpose

Researchers have long sought to understand the nature and complexity of the early years’ experience. Child development has been carefully studied through many lenses and for a number of decades as a way to ensure children are provided with quality environments and experiences that will result in positive life outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Early childhood research has focused on a myriad of factors, including brain development (Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006), social development (Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, & Yazejian, 2001), academic success (Pianta 1997), play-based learning (Fleer, 2011), partnerships with families (Rouse, 2012a), environmental influences (Hedegaard &
An important area of early childhood research has also investigated the phenomenon of educator-child relationships (for example, Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000a). These studies have specifically focused on factors that influence educator-child relationships, as well as significant outcomes that arise based upon the nature of these relationships. Findings from key studies have helped shape understandings about the significant impact educator-child relationships have on children’s lives (Howes, 2000a; Pianta, 1994; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Rolfe & Linke, 2011). For example, Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) conducted a study on 490 children to investigate if and how children’s preschool relationship with educators impacted upon their school success in the first grade. The findings from Pianta and Stuhlman’s study showed that educator-child relationships indeed play a role in children’s acquisition of skills relating to school success, asserting the importance of these relationships for child outcomes.

The current study continues on the aforementioned path of investigating educator-child relationships, however it differs in several areas. First, the age group investigated by the current study is different from most of the previous research undertaken on relationships. The majority of educator-child relationship studies tend to examine preschool and primary school-aged children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000b), whereas the current study examines children from birth to 3 years old, as this is considered a more vulnerable and crucial period of a child’s life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The birth to 3 years focus was also to reflect the significance of educator-child relationships in the current climate of Australian ECEC
experiences, where a growing number of children enter ECEC settings during the birth to 3 years period, for extensive amounts of time per week (Australian Bureau of Statistic [ABS], 2010; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2010).

The current study also considers the wellbeing of the child as one important outcome of educator-child relationships (Graham, 2011), which is distinctive from the social competence or school success emphasis found in previous research (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, Hamilton & Phillipsen, 1998). The interplay between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing was investigated to further explore the prominent role relationships have on the wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years old.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the location this research was undertaken would be of particular value to regional research in Victoria, Australia – an area that has its own unique challenges. For example, children living in regional areas of Victoria are identified as vulnerable (Australian Early Development Census [AEDC], 2015), for a variety of reasons that will be identified in this chapter, under section 1.1.5. Also, research in regional areas of Australia is limited compared to metropolitan areas (Regional Australia Institute [RAI], 2013).

Research into educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children aged 0 to 3 years is timely in the current in the Australian context, as relationships and wellbeing have both been identified as key quality areas in ECEC (Australian Childhood Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2013a). Further elaboration on key points discussed here will provide additional insight into the background of
educator-child relationships and child wellbeing to provide a justification for the current study.

1.1.1 **Relationships**

Relationships are nurturing, bi-directional bonds between two people. They are bi-directional as they require input from both individuals, and are influenced by one another’s behaviours (Bowlby, 1969). A bond is acquired when, through consistent responsiveness, positive interactions and shared affection, two people form an emotional connection that becomes a relationship. Relationships can be defined as either negative or positive, depending on the nature of that bond forged through experiences (Pianta, Nimets & Bennett, 1997). For example, when two people experience conflict, indifference, or do not have their needs met by the other person, a negative relationship can be developed. Conversely, when two people experience warmth, mutual responsiveness, positive interactions and share common interests, a positive relationship is more likely to be forged (Bowlby, 1969). As relationships between human beings form a necessary and unavoidable component of the human experience (Lavenda & Schultz, 2012), they require consideration and deconstruction.

From as early as the late 1800s, Freud (1961) postulated that children’s early relationships with significant adults had critical influence of life experiences, one’s personality and future adult relationships. Neurological research has shown the significant impact of children’s early relationships on brain development (Shonkoff, 2006), and researchers have found strong links between positive child relationships and a myriad of developmental outcomes, including social competence and school success (Hetherington, Parke, & Locke, 1999; Howes, 2000b; McCain & Mustard,
wellbeing (Graham, 2011; Statham & Chase, 2010). Furthermore, literature has asserted that strong relationships can act as a protective factor for vulnerable children (Briggs, 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Conversely, when children’s early relationships are not positive, children can be at risk of poor academic outcomes and may exhibit social withdrawal and behavioural problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000b).

In order for children to experience benefits from their relationships with significant adults, rather than be hindered by them, researchers have repeatedly asserted that these relationships need to be positive in nature (Bowlby, 1969; Ebbeck & Yim, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Howes & Smith, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Educator-child relationships can be considered positive when they are warm, responsive, respectful and reciprocal (Department of Education and Children’s Services [DECS], 2008). In an ECEC setting, it is acknowledged that these relationships are developed over time (ACECQA, 2013b), and are evident in the way educators greet, care for, respond to, and interact with children (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). What is more ambiguous is the nature of these relationships: specifically, what factors influence the levels of educator-child relationships of children from birth to 3 years, and how they might be influencing children’s wellbeing. The current study aimed to address these issues.

1.1.2 Wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing carries diverse connotations throughout prime spaces and across an array of disciplines, practices and schools of thought.
(Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2001). Wellbeing can be viewed physically, mentally or emotionally, respectively, or as a combination of the above (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth [ARACY], 2010). For the purpose of the current study, wellbeing relates to children’s satisfaction, happiness, dispositions and social functioning (DECS, 2008), thereby implying an emotional nuance.

The importance of children developing a healthy and positive wellbeing cannot be overstated, and is thoroughly represented in Australian government documents (for example ACECQA, 2013b; ARACY, 2010; DEEWR, 2009; Department of Education & Training [DET], 2016), as children with lower levels of wellbeing are vulnerable to poor self-esteem, depression, and bullying (Linke, 2007). High levels of wellbeing, however, provide children with the instruments necessary to maximise their feelings of satisfaction and learning potential (DECS, 2008), and are credited with positive life outcomes (Mayr & Ulich, 1999).

Significant to the current study, educator-child relationships and child wellbeing are considered to be holding an almost bi-directional influence over one another, from the perspective that early relationships play a key role in shaping a child’s wellbeing (Statham & Chase, 2010), but also that a child’s wellbeing can influence their relationships with others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, the emphasis on ensuring positive educator-child relationships are established in the early years maintains a strong focus on the wellbeing of the child. Safeguarding children’s wellbeing is particularly important when considering children who are vulnerable, as these children procure the most benefits from positive educator-child
relationships, as well as the birth to 3 years age group (Briggs, 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

1.1.3 **Children from birth to 3 years old**

“The first few years of life are important in the overall development of the young child” (Banham, 2000, p. 43). The current study focused solely on educator-childcare child relationships and child wellbeing in the birth to 3 years group. It is well known that the first 5 years of life hold vital significance on child outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), such as school success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and that no other period in life sees such rapid brain development (Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006). Furthermore, it is postulated that personality, within which morality, humour and empathy are positioned, is firmly established in the first 5 years of life (Cervone & Pervin, 2013). Copple, Bredekamp, Koralek and Charner (2013) highlight that the most important aspect of the first three years of life are positive relationships, and that developmentally appropriate practice requires educators to focus on this facet of ECEC in their practice.

The advantage of investing in the early years is well informed and understood in the ECEC sector (OECD, 2001), as this investment predicts positive outcomes for both children’s life trajectories and national prosperity (Council of Australian Government [COAG], 2009; Heckman, 2000). With this in mind, it becomes necessary to shift our research focus from preschool- and primary school-aged children to the younger age group. Contemporary understandings of the birth to 3 years age group demand that serious consideration be given by researchers in this area of study. It is argued that the current study accomplishes this, with a sole focus on this age group.
1.1.4 **Quality ECEC**

ECEC settings have long been important arenas where qualified educators nurture children physically, cognitively and emotionally. These settings, and the educators working within them, have an enormous responsibility to ensure children are provided with the highest quality care. In recognition of the importance of quality ECEC, the sector has recently undergone fundamental changes in order to raise the level of quality ECEC for all children in Australia.

COAG (2009) responded to the growing body of literature that informs the significance of the early years for national prosperity and as a precursor for a positive life trajectory (for example Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Huntsman, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) by developing the ECEC quality agenda. This was particularly timely and important, as the number of children attending ECEC settings in Australia and the duration of this attendance was seen to be increasing dramatically (ABS, 2010; DEEWR, 2010). In 2012, the National Quality Framework (NQF) was developed to support the ECEC quality agenda (ACECQA, 2013a).

The NQF enforced a minimum qualification for working with children (Certificate III in Children’s Services), upgrading educators’ current Diploma of Children’s Services (or equivalent) qualification to a Bachelor of Education degree for educators working with preschool aged children, and lowered child-to-staff ratios in the birth to 3 year old rooms.

Setting a minimum qualification to work with children and upgrading staff qualifications was supported by empirical research studies, which have found that children experience higher quality care and perform better when their educators
have higher qualifications (Sylva et al., 2010; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2006). Lowering staff-to-child ratios was partially driven by the understanding that quality interactions between educators and children contribute to higher levels of educator-child relationships (ACECQA, 2013a; Howes & Hamilton, 1992a; OECD, 2001). From this perspective, the current study’s focus on educator-child relationships can be considered a fundamental aspect of the COAG’s (2009) ECEC quality agenda.

An integral component of the NQF is the National Quality Standards (NQS), which provides a national benchmark for quality ECEC in Australia (ACECQA, 2013b). The NQS identified seven quality indicators in ECEC, including:

1. Educator program and practice
2. Children’s health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management

All seven NQS became a part of the national accreditation process (ACECQA, 2013b), with educator-child relationships identified as quality indicator number 5, solidifying the current study to the NQS in a meaningful way. The NQS consider educator-child relationships to be highly important in ensuring children experience a sense of security and belonging, essential factors that contribute to the development and wellbeing of children (DEEWR, 2009). A sense of security is essential to ensure children feel confident enough in their surroundings to explore their ECEC
environment, with the knowledge they have supportive educators to return to (Stupica, Sherman & Cassidy, 2011). A sense of belonging is a fundamental component of the human existence (Maslow, 1943), and children feel a sense of belonging when they feel secure in their relationships with significant adults. This sense of belonging to family, social groups, culture and community helps to shape the person they will become (DEEWR, 2009).

In Australia, ECEC educators are required to engage in warm and responsive interactions with all children in order to meet NQS quality area five. ECEC educators are expected to be considerate of the individual needs and behaviours of children, and adjust their interactions accordingly to ensure high quality relationships are occurring with every child, particularly those children in the birth to 3 years age range:

... Positive and responsive one-to-one interactions with babies and toddlers are important to both their current wellbeing and their future development. Having secure relationships with educators encourages babies and toddlers to thrive, and provides them with a secure base for exploration and learning. As children grow and develop they continue to rely on secure, trusting and respectful relationships with the adults in their lives (ACECQA, 2013b, p. 119).

A further component of the COAG (2009) ECEC quality agenda, stemming from the NQS, was Australia’s first national ECEC curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). The aims of this curriculum document were to provide Australian ECEC settings with a clear curriculum focus, and guide educators in their drive to support children achieve positive outcomes.
The EYLF includes a set of five principles and eight practices that guide and support educators’ pedagogy in the ECEC setting. As it relates to the current study, *relationships* and *responsiveness* are represented in the five principles and eight practices ECEC educators must adhere to when working with children. The EYLF highlights the importance of educator-child relationships for children’s wellbeing, sense of belong and learning (DEEWR, 2009). The foundation of this principle is that positive educator-child relationships provide a secure base for children to explore their world and develop connectedness in meaningful ways, which supports children’s overall learning and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009). The onus here is on educators’ ability to be responsive to children’s individual needs, interests and strengths in order to support their wellbeing and learning.

As well as focusing on educators’ principles and practices, the EYLF also identifies five child outcomes ECEC educators’ must support children in attaining. These five outcomes include: 1) child identity; 2) connectedness to the world; 3) a strong sense of wellbeing; 4) involved learning; and 5) effective communication (DEEWR, 2009). As it pertains to this study, *wellbeing* is one of the five child outcomes of the EYLF, dictating its importance in the early years. A positive sense of wellbeing is considered essential for a child to feel a sense of belonging to their world, confidence in being present and engaged in life’s joys, and contributing to becoming a unique individual who will participate fully in society (DEEWR, 2009; Graham, 2011). Wellbeing in the EYLF therefore encompasses health, happiness, satisfaction and social functioning. In order to support the development of a strong sense of wellbeing, the EYLF highlights the importance of educators developing warm, trusting and predictable relationships with all children (DEEWR, 2009).
Through the COAG quality agenda, the Australian government have recognised and responded to the necessity of providing children with high quality ECEC in order to produce positive child outcomes and national prosperity (COAG, 2009), with educator-child relationships and child wellbeing identified as critical aspects of acquiring this quality. Educator-child relationships are embedded within the EYLF and NQS, as they provide a foundation for which learning, development and wellbeing thrives (DEEWR, 2009; ACECQA, 2013b). It is therefore argued that the current study could contribute a significant contribution to new knowledge that could inform the field of ECEC in Australia, in the area of educator-child relationships and child wellbeing of under 3-year-olds.

1.1.5 Research location – Regional Victoria, Australia

The current study was undertaken in an inner regional town in Victoria, Australia. Regional Australia, broadly defined, refers to “the non-metropolitan areas of the nation that lie beyond the major capital cities and their immediate surrounding suburbs” (RAI, 2013, p. 1). Roughly 30.5% of Australians are living in non-metropolitan areas (ABS, 2010), compared to 69% of Australia’s population who live in major cities (Baxter, Gray, & Hayes, 2011).

There are many opportunities for growth and development in Australian regional areas (RAI, 2013), and it is argued that research becomes an important part of ensuring successful growth. Based on the potential for growth and development in this context, research into regional Australia provides significant insights into ECEC, as “the contexts and settings in which children in the regions live are different and influence their development, health and wellbeing” (Hayes & Edwards, 2011, p. 43). Experiences of being raised in a regional environment compared to a
metropolitan context can have significant impacts on children’s life trajectory (Baxter, et al., 2011), and currently, there is an unacceptable divide between opportunity and outcomes of metropolitan and regional Australia (O’Connell, Fox, Hinz & Cole, 2016). As such, it was considered important to undertake research in regional Victoria, as a way to provide insight into this vulnerable space.

The location for the current study was selected as it provided a unique insight into regional Victoria. The research location population was 33,501 (ABS, 2010), with 2486 children from birth to 5 (AEDC, 2015). The research location is identified as a fast growing regional town in Victoria, and it is estimated that the population will reach 40,670 by the year 2031 (Regional Development Victoria [RDV], 2016). It is therefore argued that research in this regional area is necessary to support informed growth and development.

Findings from the AEDC (2015) showed that 15.1% of children living in this regional area of Victoria were developmentally vulnerable (children who scored below the 10th percentile of the national population were classed as vulnerable) in at least one domain of development. The domains of development included in the AEDC data include physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language, cognitive skills, communication skills, and general knowledge (AEDC, 2015). That 15.1% of the regional area’s children were found to be developmentally vulnerable in at least one of these domains signifies the need for increasing research into regional areas, in order to provide contextually relevant insight and knowledge that may improve child outcomes. The current study aimed to achieve this by investigating educator-child relationships and child wellbeing (an AEDC developmental domain) from birth to 3-years of age.
Furthermore, research in regional areas is important for the ECEC field, as it has been found that lifestyles and child outcomes are different for regional children compared to metropolitan children (Baxter et al., 2011). Children who grow up in regional areas have less access to basic services, spend less time outside and have lower levels of physical development and learning outcomes than their metropolitan counterparts (Baxter et al., 2011). Researchers have also argued that children growing up in regional and rural areas of Australia are far less likely to undertake higher education; furthermore, their life satisfaction, health and wellbeing are at risk (McCallum & Price, 2016).

Moreover, the AEDC (2015) data reveals that children living in regional areas of Victoria have higher rates of school absenteeism, family violence, child protection reports, teenage pregnancy, criminal convictions and binge drinking, amongst others. In addition, only 57% of children living in regional Victoria graduate from high school, compared to a state total of 75% (AEDC, 2015). Children who are living in regional areas of Victoria are considered to be at a disadvantage in many areas compared to their metropolitan counterparts, and something must be done to bridge this gap; however, it is still common practice for research in Australia to be undertaken in metropolitan areas (RAI, 2013).

The findings of research conducted in metropolitan areas of Australia do significantly inform the early childhood sector, but due to the vast difference between metropolitan and regional experiences these findings may not necessarily translate or inform ECEC practice in regional Australia. The current study intends to contribute further knowledge relating to ECEC in regional Victoria, especially as it
relates to regional children from birth to 3 years, in relation to educator-child relationships and child wellbeing.

1.1.6 **Purpose statement**

The purpose of the current study was to provide comprehensive knowledge and insight into two important aspects of early childhood: educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years in a regional context. It is argued that the current study provides insight into children’s early experiences in the contemporary climate of Australian ECEC, and findings derived from this research could inform ECEC policy and practice.

1.2 **Significance of the research**

The current study contributes new knowledge to the field of ECEC in relation to educator-child relationships and child wellbeing. Specifically, the significance of the current study can be considered from three perspectives: 1) the birth to 3 year age group; 2) the regional location; and 3) informing the Australian ECEC quality agenda. It was hoped that the three significant aspects of the current study could contribute to contemporary understandings of children, thereby supporting investment in the early years.

The first significant aspect of the current study is entrenched in the birth to 3 year age group of child participants. It has been identified by the ARACY (2011) that there is limited research in Australia on children from birth to 3 years. Furthermore, previous key studies on educator-child relationships predominantly focused on preschool and primary school-aged children (Howes, 2000b; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), as have studies that examined aspects of quality in ECEC (Sylva et al., 2004).
This has left a gap in contemporary knowledge and understanding of children’s experiences in the first 3 years of life. The current study aimed to bridge this gap in relation to two aspects of quality in ECEC: educator-child relationships and child wellbeing.

The second significant aspect of the current study is embedded in the research location: regional Victoria, Australia. Research in Australia is predominantly undertaken in metropolitan areas, with regional research found to be limited (RAI, 2013), especially in the area of child development (Hayes & Edwards, 2011). The limited amount of research in regional areas of Victoria leaves a gap in knowledge and understandings about children’s early experiences. The gap in knowledge has implications for children growing up in regional contexts: as the application of knowledge informed by metropolitan research may not necessarily translate to regional settings, it can be ineffective in both delivery and practicality (RAI, 2013). The current study aimed to strengthen the knowledge base and inform the field of ECEC, and provide relevant understandings derived from contextually pertinent research that can be applied to practice and policy in regional Victoria.

The third significant aspect of the current study is that it is relevant and timely in the Australian context, based on the ECEC quality agenda that aims to improve child outcomes (COAG, 2009). Educator-child relationships are considered an important foundational component of the positive child outcomes, as positive relationships have been found to have significant impacts on children’s brain development (Shonkoff, 2006) and later school success (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Educator-child relationships are also viewed as contributing to child outcomes, in particular children’s wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009; Graham, 2011). The current study
aimed to provide insights into the current levels of educator-child relationships and child wellbeing, which could inform the ECEC quality agenda and ECEC policy. Furthermore, the current study investigated what factors influence the level of educator-child relationships, which could have implications for educators practice.

Ultimately, understanding how and why people form relationships, when viewed from a connectedness/disconnectedness perspective, is a worthwhile endeavour for researchers. Explaining the fundamental nature of early relationships can be an onerous undertaking, as there are a myriad of factors to consider when it comes to being connected to another human in a meaningful way resulting in a strong relationship with that significant person. More often than not, feelings of being connected to another person in a meaningful way remain mysterious, which can result in a lack of concerted effort in developing and maintaining these important relationships – especially between educators and children in ECEC.

Investing in the early years now can achieve benefits for society as a whole, “through enhanced human capital and capability, increased productivity, greater social inclusion and reduced public expenditure in health, welfare and crime” (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council [AHMAC], 2011, p. 7). Children who are happy and healthy develop into resilient and high functioning adults, who are more likely to contribute to a prosperous society and lead fulfilling lives (COAG, 2009). Children’s relationships and wellbeing are recognised as significant components of quality in the early years, and therefore support the impetus of the current study.
1.3 Theory

The theoretical perspectives that served to inform this research project were adopted for their focus on child relationships, and how these relationships function in children’s ecological systems to support the development of wellbeing. Specifically, this research project was informed by ethological attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

1.3.1 Attachment theory

Attachment theory looks at children’s early relationships with significant adults as an evolved response essential to ensure survival (Bowlby, 1969/1973/1980). This theory described specific attachment-seeking behaviours (for example, crying, clinging, mutual gaze, following) that serve to support the attachment of a child to their primary caregiver. This is of particular importance in the first years of life, a time when children are most dependent on adults to meet their needs. As informed by attachment theory, children can establish several attachments in the first 3 years of life, based on adults who provide nurturing and consistent responses to children’s needs (Ainsworth, 1978). Bowlby (1969) asserted that early relationships are bi-directional, and caregivers’ responsiveness towards children’s attachment behaviours would result in one of four attachment classifications, first described by Ainsworth (1978): 1) secure; 2) insecure/avoidant; 3) insecure/resistant; and 4) insecure/disorganised-disorientated. These classifications are elaborated on in Chapter 2 (section 2.3.1.6).

Bowlby (1969) suggested that a child’s attachment classification influences their life experiences. For example, when children acquire a secure attachment, it acts as a secure base for emotional security and exploration, which would see
children confidently engage in their world to develop necessary skills and positive relationships with others. Children’s attachment to significant adults serves to promote positive life experiences and outcomes. Conversely, if a child develops an insecure attachment, their life experiences may be tainted by insecure involvement in their environments and their relationships with others, putting their development and positive life outcomes at risk (Bowlby, 1969). It is important to note that this research did not intend to discover the attachment classification of children with their educator, but rather to inform the significance of early relationships on the developing child, and provided insight into behaviours and factors that influence educator-child relationships.

1.3.2 Ecological systems theory

Relationships are commonly considered from an ecological systems perspective, which sees children’s development and wellbeing being influenced by their environment and those situated within the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological theory presents a model that illustrates the interaction of various network systems that influence a child’s development. Elements are positioned within four systems: 1) microsystem; 2) mesosystem; 3) exosystem; 4) macrosystem and 5) chronosystem. These systems are elaborated on further in section 4.2.3.

Each ecological system is said to influence the child in both direct and non-direct ways, and Bronfenbrenner (1979) postulates that the most direct influences on the child are found within the microsystem. As it relates to the current study, ECEC settings and educators are present and influential within the child’s microsystem. Educator-child relationships therefore have the capacity to influence children’s development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
Both attachment theory and ecological systems theory describe the importance of early, bi-directional relationships with significant adults, and assert the significance of early relationships on children’s functioning, wellbeing and development (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further insights into how these theories informed the research will be presented in Chapter 2 (section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2).

1.4 Methodology

The focus of the current study, being children from birth to 3 years living in regional Victoria, prescribed a parameter that defined the research, and as such a case study was considered the most appropriate methodological approach. Through the use of a focused lens, case studies ensure an in-depth exploration of the research issue is undertaken (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2009) describes case study research as “holistic” and “meaningful” (p. 4), offering a depth of understanding about real life events and social phenomena. The nature of the current study, which focuses on children’s relationships and wellbeing, required a comprehensive investigation that would provide insights to the research issue, which a case study would offer; however, adopting mixed methods to collect the data was also required to comprehensively answer the research questions (Greene, 2007). A mixed-methods approach within a case study allowed for baseline data to be collected through quantitative methods, and this was further supported and enlivened by rich, descriptive data derived from qualitative methods (Greene, 2005).
1.5 Research questions

Using past and current literature to identify research gaps, four key questions were developed to explore educator-child relationships on three levels in order to understand the research issue comprehensively:

1) What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?
2) What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?
3) What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?
4) What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

Research Question 1 (RQ1) aimed to establish baseline data that would provide a quantifiable and transparent representation of current educator-child relationships levels found within regional Victoria, specifically relating to children from birth to 3 years of age. Quantitative methods were used in order to discover the educator-child relationship level, in the form of a standardised observational scale. Educator-child relationships were observed through specific domains, including responsiveness, positive interactions, quality verbal exchanges and appropriateness. These domains of educator-child relationships were examined using qualitative methods (semi-structured interview and naturalistic observations) to describe the nature of these relationships. The intent of this research question was to provide insight into ECEC quality in regional Victoria by determining the current level of educator-child relationships, as educator-child relationships are a key quality area of the NQS.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) aimed to discover factors that were observed and perceived by educators as contributing to the educator-child relationship level. It
was hoped that the findings from this question could support educators develop positive educator-child relationships, informed by factors found to contribute to them. For the purpose of this research, only factors that could be observed in the ECEC setting were investigated, for example children’s behaviour, gender and age, as well as educators’ work experience and stability in the ECEC setting. Data that answered RQ2 was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a standardised observation scale, semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations.

Research Question 3 (RQ3) aimed to establish baseline data that would identify the current level of child wellbeing in regional Victoria. As previously described, wellbeing in this study refers to children’s happiness, satisfaction and social functioning, and so these domains were the focus of data collection. The aforementioned domains were measured using quantitative methods in the form of a standardised observational scale, while semi-structured interview and naturalistic observations contributed to the understanding of the nature of child wellbeing in ECEC.

Research Question 4 (RQ4) aimed to determine what, if any, links are found between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing. The intent of RQ4 was to discover if children’s wellbeing was an outcome of educator-child relationships, as prescribed in the EYLF. Findings from RQ1 and RQ3 were used to inform RQ4.

Ultimately, the current study aimed to provide findings that would contribute new knowledge to the field of ECEC in the current Australian climate, addressing research gaps previously identified in this chapter.
1.6 Definition of key terms

Throughout this thesis, specific terms relating to the Australian ECEC sector will be used frequently. In order to better prepare the reader for this occurrence, succinct definitions of key terms are provided below.

**Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting** in Australia is an environment where children from birth to six years are cared for and educated by qualified educators. These include Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Occasional Care and Preschool.

**Educator** is any professional who holds a sector-related qualification and is working in the field of ECEC and primary settings.

**Young children** refers to children from birth to 3 years old.

**Infants and toddlers** refers to children from birth to 3 years old.

**Relationships** (educator-child) refer to bi-directional, caring bonds between educators and children.

**Wellbeing**, for the purpose of this project, refers to children’s emotional state of self. This includes feelings of happiness, self-satisfaction and social functioning that contribute towards emotional wellbeing.

**Routine transition times** occur in ECEC settings, where children and educators move from one routine to another throughout the day (for example, from lunch time to sleep time).

**Group times** refer to an activity where all children are involved, led by the educator.
1.7 Thesis Structure

The following description of the thesis structure provides the reader with clear signposts that prepare and guide the reader through each chapter.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Chapter 2 provides background information on the current research issue. The aim of Chapter 2 is to analyse, compare and contrast past and current literature on educator-child relationships, child wellbeing and quality ECEC. The literature review introduces research and policy documents, which culminate in a description of educator-child relationships in the regional Australian context of the research, and detail the importance of these relationships on children’s development and wellbeing.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

Chapter 3 describes the research design of the current study. A description of the conceptual framework, research paradigm and methodological approach chosen to structure the current study is presented and justified. The research instruments, data collection and data analysis process are described, and ethical consideration presented. Demographic information of the research participants is also outlined.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

Chapter 4 presents the current study findings to inform the research issue. The quantitative and qualitative data complement each other to provide conclusive answers to the four research questions.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study in critical detail with reference to previous research and theory. Themes that emerged from the data relating to the four research questions of the current study are explored closely to provide a detailed representation of the research outcomes, and their significance and implications for the field of ECEC.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter 6 identifies the strengths and limitations of the current study. The implications of its findings will be discussed, and recommendations for policy, practice and further research will be suggested. A broad summary of the current study will conclude this chapter and the thesis.

1.8 Summary of Chapter 1

The current study was designed to inform the current level and nature of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years in regional Victoria, Australia. It was the intent of the current study that findings would serve to contribute new knowledge and understandings into the nature and level of children’s wellbeing. Furthermore, the current study intended to investigate what factors influence the educator-child relationship level, and determine if and how there is a link between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing.

It is argued that the current study provides insight into children’s early experiences in the contemporary climate of Australian ECEC, and findings derived from this research could inform ECEC policy and practice.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

Vignette 2.1 describes a positive educator-child relationship found within an ECEC setting. These positive relationships are complex in nature, and will be deconstructed in this chapter. The personal reflection journey vignettes are not data from the current study, but rather an amalgamation of the researcher’s educator-child relationship experiences over her 9-years teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

Vignette 2.1 – Personal reflection journey: Part 2

I watch Jimmy knock the toy dinosaur off the top of the sandpit mountain; he laughs and growls playfully. I smile warmly; I feel fondness for this boy. He picks the toy dinosaur up and walks over to me: ‘Did you see that?’ he asks, his cheeks flushed with excitement. ‘I did, that was amazing! What else can your dinosaur do?’ I express genuine glee at his efforts, and curiosity in his interests. He casually sits on my knee, and I respond effortlessly to this gesture by placing her arm snugly around his shoulder, embracing him. We engage in an animated discussion about dinosaurs, laughing together as we talk. I reflect on my interaction with this boy. I feel very connected to him, a nurturing sense of care and affection. I would happily engage with this child all day. I consider the nature of this bond. I cannot recall the precise moment when the connection occurred, only that it seemed to have always been this way. I question my philosophy, my pedagogy – myself as an educator. Why are my relationships with some children better than others?

The literature review presents contemporary understandings of issues surrounding educator-child relationships and child wellbeing, based on past and current literature, and describes the theoretical perspectives adopted to guide the current study. Various forms of scholarly works and policy documents were collected.
and critiqued in order to deliver a robust literature review, thereby providing an informed foundation for the current research project.

Specifically, the literature review will start by introducing the research issue of relationships and wellbeing. Next, theoretical perspectives will be discussed, with links made to the research issue. A review of literature and policy documents will be used to examine the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia, and identify how this is related to the current study. Finally, past and current research will be presented that has explored factors found to influence educator-child relationships.

Throughout the literature review, the reader will be provided with signposts and a clear understanding of the research issue, and key research gaps addressed by the current study will be unearthed.

2.1 Relationships

As Reis, Collins and Berscheid wrote, “interpersonal relationships are the foundation and theme of human life” (2000, p. 844). These relationships provide humans with a sense of belonging and support, and are considered to be one of the most important influences on overall personality, development and wellbeing (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). There are various different types of relationships experienced by humans. These include, but are not limited to, romantic, paternal and social relationships (Reis, et al., 2000). The current study focused on one particular relationship experienced by an increasing number of children from birth to 3 years in Australia: the educator-child relationship formed in ECEC settings.
The term ‘relationship’ is so often used, throughout everyday life and in varying contexts, that it becomes appropriate to provide a definition of relationships pertaining to the current study. Over half a century ago Harlow (1958) expressed the frustration of researchers and theorists at defining human connectedness:

... our assigned mission as psychologists is to analyse all facets of human and animal behaviour into their complete variables. So far as love or affection is concerned, psychologists have failed in their mission. The little we know about love does not transcend simple observation and the little we know about it has been better written by poets and novelists (p. 673).

While it is difficult to present one clear definition of such a complex and intimate facet experienced by the human species, one such definition was put forth in order to anchor the current research. In relation to the current study, an applicable definition of relationships is as an enduring emotional bond that entwines one person to another in a meaningful way across time and space (Ainsworth, 1978).

In the ECEC setting, where children are cared for and educated by trained professionals, an enduring bond is observed in positive educator-child relationships, which are described as warm, nurturing and bidirectional, and are considered to be of the utmost importance in the pursuit of high quality ECEC in Australia (ACECQA, 2013b). A further description of educator-child relationships is that they are based on appropriate responsiveness and positive interactions between educator and children, and that they continue to change and develop over time (DECS, 2008). In the ECEC setting, both the child and educators’ behaviour is influencing the other person’s sub-behaviours, thereby creating a bi-directional relationship where both parties involved are influencing the nature of the bond (Bowlby, 1969).
Romanticised words for relationships have been employed in an attempt to discover one that can satisfyingly draw together all we know and understand about relationships, for example: reciprocal, warm, trusting, close, or positive relationships. While these articulations aim to provide an all-encompassing description of relationships, simple and brief labels (as identified above) can sometimes arouse confusion as to the nature of the relationship at hand, as they each carry slightly different connotations (Reis et al., 2000). The current study describes educator-child relationships as ‘positive relationships’ throughout the research. This is not to discount other descriptions or denotations, but rather to amalgamate them, thereby acknowledging the multi-faceted phenomenon that ‘relationships’ are. The term ‘positive relationship’ encompasses the constructive elements of educator-child relationships, including the aforementioned reciprocal warmth, trust, and closeness shared between two people.

The main focus of the current study was to investigate the current level of educator-child relationships of children from birth to 3 years in five ECEC settings in a regional context in Victoria, Australia. Furthermore, it investigated factors that contribute to the levels of these educator-child relationships. This is considered vital and timely research, as the importance of educator-child relationships on young children’s development and wellbeing is now widely proclaimed (ACECQA, 2013b; COAG, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Howes, 2000a; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Considering that Australian children are presently attending ECEC settings at a younger age, for more hours during the day, and more days per week (ABS, 2010), understanding the current state of educator-child relationships in Australia is essential if children are to experience quality ECEC, which serves to foster their sense
of wellbeing. Below, aspects of relationships will be discussed as they pertain to the current study.

2.1.1 Educator-child relationships

Educator-child relationships are found nestled within ECEC settings. In Australian ECEC settings, all children are cared for and educated by qualified professionals (COAG, 2009). The most recent statistics of children’s ECEC attendance revealed that the amount of children that attend ECEC in Australia continues to increase over time, and that over 871,000 children attend formal ECEC settings (ABS, 2010). The most recent ECEC statistics shows that the average Australian child attends their ECEC setting for 17 hours per week. A total of 37% of these children spend an average of 10 to 29 hours per week there, with another 16% of children spending over 30 hours (ABS, 2010). Significant to the current study, children’s ECEC attendance peaks at 3 years of age (ABS, 2010). The implication that can be drawn from these figures is that some children from birth to 3 years are spending more of their waking hours with their ECEC educator than they are spending with their parents. Consequently, it can be argued that educator-child relationships forged in ECEC settings become influential in the lives of young children (DEEWR, 2009; Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

In the first 3 years of life, adult figures are a child’s primary form of security, and they provide a safe base that promotes exploration (Barbre, 2013; Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Bowlby, 1969; Dolby, 2007), leading to development. As children enter into middle childhood, attachments to primary and substitute caregivers become less vital, as children begin to form relationships with peers, as well as becoming active participants in community and athletic services, while also maturing
to develop common sense and academic abilities that provide them with a sense of security (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Considering this, it becomes clear that there is great responsibility on the shoulders of adults to ensure a child’s sense of security is established through positive relationships in the first 3 years of life.

It is commonly asserted that children are capable of developing attachments to not only their mother, but also to other significant adults (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Hetherington, et al., 1999; Howes, Galinsky & Kontos, 1998; Whitebread, 2012). Importantly, children’s ECEC educators can be considered significant attachment figures for children in the absence of their primary attachment figure (De Schipper, Tavecchio, & Van IJzendoorn, 2008; Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Howes, 2000). ECEC educators assume the role of caregiver, which sees them meet children’s physical, emotional and education needs on a regular basis. Even though attachment relationships are not considered to be as strong between educator and child as they are between mother and child (Bowlby, 1969; Howes and Hamilton, 1992a), children can still forge meaningful relationships with educators that are influential from an early age (Earls & Carlson, 2001).

Parents send the message to their child that the ECEC educator will take care of at least their basic needs in their absence (Howes & Hamilton, 1992a). It is therefore vital that educators recognise the important role they have to play, and assume the responsibility of fostering the development of positive relationships with children. Educators working in ECEC need to demonstrate to children that they are cared for (DET, 2016). Developing warm, trusting and nurturing relationships with young children promotes children’s wellbeing and sense of security (DEEWR, 2009). Research suggests that this conception is already prevalent amongst educators.
working in the ECEC field, and that they regard their relationships with infants and toddlers as having great importance (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Recchia & Loizou, 2002). While educators may be aware of the significance of their relationships with children, they also have to be aware of the role that their responses and behaviours play in their development.

Hamre and Pianta (2001) asserts the importance of understanding the inner workings of these relationships, and considers them as holding significant influence on children’s behaviour, and social and academic development. Many robust relationship studies have found that educator-child relationships do, indeed, influence children’s developmental outcomes (for example, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 1988; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and brain architecture (Shonkoff, Boyce & McEwen, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and have the potential to promote positive or negative child behaviours (Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early & Barbarin, 2005).

In the ECEC setting, a noteworthy point is that children can experience a secure, positive relationship with one educator in their setting, but not so with another. A case study by Recchia (2012) involving two male toddlers was undertaken to determine children’s relationships with educators through transition from the infant room to the preschool room. Both subjects were classified as having a secure attachment with their infant room educator. After their transition to the preschool room, one child was considered securely attached to their new caregiver, while the other showed signs of stress and formed a strained relationship with his caregiver. However, upon reflection on their own behaviours toward the child, the educators adjusted their approach and responses, which resulted in the development of
positive relationships between them and the children. Recchia (2012) concluded that adaptable and sensitive caregiving contributes to the development of positive relationships between children and educators. In this way, educators have a greater opportunity to meet the individual needs of each child, especially if they are educated in the nature of relationships.

2.1.2 **Relationships and brain development**

Schuengel (2012) asserts that educator-child relationships should be recognised as a serious developmental issue. Brain development research stipulates that the interplay of early stimulation on a child’s brain has long-term impacts on the life outcomes (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Shonkoff, 2006). The rapid growth in learning and development between birth and 5 years is unmatched by any other stage in human life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In the first year of life neural pathways develop rapidly through interactions and experiences, and set the stage for lifelong learning (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006). During this critical period of development, unused synapses are ‘pruned’ in order to make useful pathways in the brain (Berk & Meyers, 2016), also known as brain wiring (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Early established mental and behavioural patterns are difficult to change once a child has entered school (Heckman & Wax, 2004), and it is therefore important to stimulate the brain in the first 3 years of life. One known way to support children’s brain develop during the birth to 3 years period, and activate synapses that support later learning, is through the development of positive relationships (Shonkoff, 2006): “Positive relationships are critical for the healthy development of infants and toddlers” (Mann & Carney, 2008, p. 148). Children from birth to 3 years exhibit inherent and instinctual behaviours, regulated by biological
control system in the brain, attempting to secure attachment to significant adults (Bowlby, 1969; Schore, 2000). Responsive and nurturing relationships during the first 3 years of life are therefore especially important for brain development (Mann & Carney, 2008; Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006). Shonkoff (2006) encapsulates this notion perfectly when he states that:

... Nurturing and responsive interactions build healthy brain architecture that provides a strong foundation for later learning, behaviour, and health. Recurrent and excessive stress in the absence of protective relationships results in persistent activation of the body’s stress-management systems, which includes continuous elevation of serum cortisol. These increased hormone levels undermine the immune response and disrupt brain architecture by impairing cell growth and interfering with the formation of healthy neural circuits (p. 2188).

An important outcome achieved from healthy brain structure is children’s school success, which is a serious consideration for children’s parents, as well as the Australian government (COAG, 2009). A strong focus on school success is particularly important for children growing up in regional areas, where the current study was undertaken, as it has been found that these children are less likely to attend university (McCallum & Price, 2016). Social skills, emotional health and wellbeing, and cognitive capacities are all important prerequisites for success in school and later in the workplace (Pianta, 1997), and secure and positive relationships between children and significant adults have been found to be strong predictors for academic and behavioural adjustment at school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes, 2012; Shonkoff, 2006).

Pianta and colleagues have been involved in a number of research projects that looked at children’s relationships with their educator. These projects have consistently found that positive educator-child relationships play an important role in children’s later school success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 2005; Pianta,
Nimetz & Bennett, 1997; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995). An example of one such study is Hamre and Pianta’s (2001), which was undertaken to discover the correlation between early teacher-child relationships and children’s school outcomes. The key study, which followed a sample of 179 kindergarten children through to the eighth grade, found that teacher-child relationships in kindergarten which were characterised by teachers as either high conflict or high dependency resulted in poor academic outcomes from grade one through to eight, especially for boys (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The development of poor work habits and behavioural problems in later schooling was also found as a result of negative relationships between teacher and children in preschool. Conversely, positive relationships were found to be an indicator of social adaption and behaviour outcomes. This study did not, however, measure children’s perceptions of their relationships with teachers, which could have provided more insight into the quality of those relationships.

More recent research has been undertaken by Maldonado-Carreno and Votruba-Drzal (2011), who used data from the multi-method longitudinal study on non-parental care experiences and child development conducted by the NICHD to examine the link between educator-child relationships and school success. The findings revealed that the quality of teacher-child relationships is directly related to behaviour and academic outcomes through to the fifth year (Maldonado-Carreno and Votruba-Drzal, 2011). The repeated measure of relationship quality undertaken in this study showed no significant change over time, indicating that children’s relationships with their teachers remain mostly unchanged as they progress through their school years.
Additionally, a study by O’Connor and McCartney (2007), which also used data from the NICHD, concluded that high quality teacher-child relationships fostered children’s overall achievement. While this finding supports the importance of educator-child relationships, it must be noted that it was not the only factor found to contribute to child outcomes. O’Connor and McCartney (2007) also considered the impact of ecological factors, and conclude that child outcomes are a result of many of those, including environment, poverty, gender, culture, school environment, and school relationships. Thompson (1988/2000) supports this conclusion, suggesting that a secure or insecure attachment in early childhood, by itself, does not dictate psychosocial and school outcomes for children.

Informed by previous research literature presented above, the consensus is that educator-child relationships are an important facet in the lives of children, particularly in ECEC settings where a large amount of Australian children are spending a considerable amount of time per week (ABS, 2010). Of particular significance to the current study, educator-child relationships are considered to influence children’s sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).

2.2 Wellbeing

The notion of ‘wellbeing’ was introduced by Greek philosopher Aristotle (384BC-322BC) when he postulated his ‘good life’ philosophy (Baur, McAdams & Sakaeda, 2005). Aristotle argued that attainment of a good life was a type of pursuit of happiness, while also yielding to the fact that external factors and luck played a part (Ackrill, 1981). Aristotle’s notion of wellbeing as the attainment of a good life has been developed further over the years (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2009). In the 20th century, the idea of humans working towards gaining and attaining self-
satisfaction in their life evolved, and can be related to what we consider to be wellbeing today. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs identified self-actualisation at the top of the human needs pyramid, and it is accepted that, try as we might, humans will never reach this milestone (Nixon & Gould, 1999). While achieving self-actualisation or the ‘good life’ may not be attainable, the journey humans take certainly has influenced our developing understandings of wellbeing.

In the 21st century, wellbeing theory is still evolving, and therefore is often regarded as being ill-defined with a weak theoretical basis (ARACY, 2010; Graham, 2011; Mayr & Ulich, 1999; Ryff, 1989; Statham & Chase, 2010). White (2008) concurs that “the concept of wellbeing is notoriously difficult to define precisely” (p. 3). He goes on to describe wellbeing as a process rather than a state, arguing that people are constructing and reconstructing their wellbeing through their social integrations and relatedness with the people in their lives. White postulates that people become who they are, in part, as a result of the interpersonal relationships they experience. She uses three dimensions to theorise wellbeing: subjective, material and relational (see Figure 2.1).

![White's multidimensional approach to wellbeing](image)

*Figure 2.1: White’s multidimensional approach to wellbeing*

White’s dimensions of wellbeing can be explained as follows:

- The **material** concerns practical welfare and standards of living
- The **relational** concerns personal and social relations
- The **subjective** concerns values, perceptions and experience (White, 2008, p. 7).

White’s (2008) dimensions of wellbeing merge together to provide a realistic description of the formation of one’s wellbeing, and this theory is consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, supporting the interdependence of different dimensions of wellbeing.

As it pertains to the current study, focus on the nature of child wellbeing in particular has shifted over the past century, from concentrating mainly on its health and safety aspects – including child mortality rates (Ben-Arieh, 2006) – to considering the importance of holistic wellbeing for the quality of children’s lives and overall development, including feelings of happiness and satisfaction, social functioning and dispositions (DECS, 2008). Resnick (1995) supports this, stating that “children’s well-being indicators are on the move from concentrating only on trends of dying, distress, disability and discomfort to tackling the issue of indicators of sparkle, satisfaction and wellbeing” (p. 3). Ultimately, in the context of life in the 21st century, wellbeing is considered multidimensional, and environmentally and culturally relative (ARACY, 2010; Graham, 2011; Mayr & Ulich, 1999; Ryff, 1989; Statham & Chase, 2010).

Informed by literature and theory, the current study adopted a clear definition of wellbeing that encapsulated observable facets of children’s wellbeing.
within the ECEC setting, and anchored the wellbeing aspect of the research. The definition of wellbeing of the current study is

... a complex physical and psychological state comprising good health and feelings of happiness, satisfaction and social functioning. It is demonstrated through ones interactions in the environment (Ebbeck, Phoon, Tan-Chong, Tan & Goh, 2015, p. 233).

Specifically, children’s feeling of happiness and satisfaction, social functioning and dispositions were the focus of the current study, as the aforementioned facets of wellbeing are considered to be influenced by environmental factors, such as educator-child relationships in ECEC settings (DECS, 2008; Graham, 2011).

2.2.1 Importance of child wellbeing

The importance of positive wellbeing on children’s emotional, mental and physical health cannot be overstated, and is essential for a child’s healthy growth and development (Ebbeck et al., 2015). High levels of wellbeing in children maximise their “learning potential, encouraging the positive development of children’s innate exploratory drive, a sense of agency and the desire to interact with responsive others” (DECS, 2008, p. 67). Children who do not develop a positive wellbeing are at higher risk of low self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, depression, eating disorders, youth unemployment and being bullied (Linke, 2007).

Children’s wellbeing is also thoroughly represented in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations [UN], 1990). Amongst the 42 articles of the UNCRC, the underlying theme can be considered the right for children to develop a strong sense of wellbeing. For example, Article 3 states that every effort be made to protect and care for children’s wellbeing, encompassing the best interest
of the child through safety, health and overall care (UN, 1990). Another example can be found in Article 27, which states that recognition is given to “the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” (UN, 1990, p. 8). The UNCRC support the best interest of the child, and wellbeing is essential for interpreting what is in the child’s best interest (Camfield, Streuli & Woodhead, 2008). This is particularly true for the birth to 3 years age group, where children are unable, or less capable, of voicing their thoughts and opinions about matters that affect them (Smith, 2008), leaving them with little control over their experiences in the critical first years of life.

2.2.1.1 **Happiness and satisfaction**

One perspective on wellbeing adopted by the current researcher is the focus on happiness, attributing feelings of joy and pleasure to the attainment of wellbeing (Graham, 2011). Holder (2012) claims that there is universal consensus that happiness in children is of great value, and therefore becomes worthy of research. In this space, happiness is often viewed from two different perspectives:

1) **Hedonia** – feelings of pleasure/pain avoidance

2) **Eudaimonia** – self-realisation/a life well lived

(Kringelbach & Berridge, 2009).

As it pertains to the current study, happiness is considered from a hedonic perspective, as the research aimed to measure children’s expression of happiness and satisfaction through their engagement in the ECEC setting, and with their ECEC educator and peers. Children from birth to 3 years typically pursue feelings of happiness from a hedonic view, as they aim to experience feelings of pleasure
through exploration and social engagement, rather than focusing on ‘living a good life’ (Aristotle) or ‘self-actualisation’ (Maslow). Children’s focus on hedonic happiness is an important contributor to their overall development, as they develop skills by exploring the world around them and through social interactions (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). A hedonic perspective of happiness is also considered to be prominent in young children’s behaviours due to their limited development and egocentric nature during the first 3 years of life (Freud, 1961).

As feelings of happiness can be considered an internal working model, and children from birth to 3 years old are limited in their ability to verbally express their feelings, their behaviours within the environment are considered an expression of happiness (DECS, 2008). When children demonstrate pleasure while interacting with experiences and people, they are indicating feelings of happiness through their behaviour. For example, when children are observed to be alert, active and spontaneous they demonstrate vitality, which can be considered an expression of happiness (DECS, 2008). Similarly, when children initiate social interactions, through which they show enthusiasm, fun and humour, they are demonstrating feelings of happiness and satisfaction through their behaviours (DECS, 2008). Supporting children’s pursuit of happiness requires educators’ knowledge of creating a fun and stimulating ECEC environment, for instance, when children are given resources and materials that they can manipulate, it contributes towards the development of creativity and imagination (Bodrova & Leong, 2003), two important components of happiness. Furthermore, educators need to support the development of autonomy and essential skill building by supporting children’s exploration in the environment, including risk taking play (Little & Wyver, 2008). Banham (2000) asserts that a crucial
component of child development lies in educators’ ability to support and scaffold children’s play through creating learning opportunities and enjoyable experiences in the ECEC setting.

While Holder (2012) asserts that most children are indeed happy, he stresses the importance of undertaking research on children’s happiness as an ongoing indicator of wellbeing. The current study aims to contribute to the limited research available of children’s happiness (Holder, 2012), from a wellbeing perspective.

2.2.1.2 Social functioning

Children’s social functioning has implications for their engagement within their environment, which in turn has certain impacts on their learning, development and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009). Social competence, which is the essence of social functioning, requires children to have specific knowledge and skills essential for communicating and interacting effectively with others (Feldman, 2014). Behaviours that are attributed to social competence include:

- Social values
- Personal identity
- Emotional Intelligence
- Interpersonal skills
- Self-regulation
- Planning, organising, and decision making
- Cultural competence (Kostelnik, Soderman, Whiren, Rupiper & Gregory, 2015, p. 3)

As it relates to the current study, the birth to 3 years age group is a period where many of these behaviours and skills are underdeveloped; however, gains in social competence are made in the first 4 years of life (Fleer, 2014). Based on the age
group of the current study, it can be expected to find children participating in
specific play styles identified by Parten (1933), including solitary play (playing alone),
parallel play (playing alongside peers) and associative play (more than one child is
playing the same thing) in the ECEC settings. Past research suggests that children rely
on educators to guide their social functioning (Robertson, 2016). One way to support
children’s movement through these stages of play, thereby ensuring their
attainment of social competence, is by establishing positive educator-child
relationships.

Positive educator-child relationships have been found to be one of the
strongest predictors of positive social development in young children (Hamre &
Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001), impacting on children’s ability to
develop positive relationships with their peers in the early years (Howes, 2000b;
Howes et al., 1998). Research has found that if children have a positive relationship
with their educators, they are more likely to be more socially accepted (Howes,
2000b; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), which in turn contributes to their wellbeing
(Graham, 2011).

One example of the significance of educator-child relationships on children’s
social functioning can be seen in a longitudinal study by Howes (2000b), which
examined the effects of ECEC on children. The findings showed that children with
low child-teacher relationship closeness showed higher levels of peer aggression,
social withdrawal and more behavioural problems. Conversely, children with high
child-teacher relationship closeness rated high in pro-social behaviour. These
findings indicate that the level of child-teacher relationships is a predictor of
children’s social outcomes, positive or negative (Howes, 2000b). An additional study
by Howes and Hamilton (1993) found that children can become socially withdrawn and aggressive when children experience changes in educators, indicating that educator-child relationships play an intricate role in the development of social competencies in early childhood.

The above research highlights the interplay between educator-child relationships. Particularly, they can support children’s social functioning, which is an aspect of children’s wellbeing in the current study (DECS, 2008).

2.2.1.3 **Dispositions**

Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Voseles (2007) identify that dispositions are “frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing” (p. 1), and that educators are now becoming more aware of the importance of understanding children’s dispositions in ECEC settings, as it is an essential component of quality teaching practices (Da Ros-Voseles & Fowler-Haughey, 2007; Moyles, 2012). Moyles (2012) states that dispositions can be positive or negative in nature (i.e. helpful nature or selfish nature) and that children’s positive dispositions can be nurtured or ‘taught’. Arthur and colleagues (2015) state that desirable dispositions are an essential prerequisite for children’s successful learning in a rapidly changing world. Children’s habitual practices that inform a desirable disposition were found to contribute to their overall learning and wellbeing, through enthusiastic engagement within the ECEC setting. In this way, findings from the current study can confidently assert that regional children in ECECE setting have dispositions that will promote their learning in the early years. However, regional children in Victoria have been described by past literature and research as at risk of developmental vulnerability and limited educational outcomes (AEDC, 2015). As findings from the current study suggest,
between the ages of 0-3 children acquire the necessary dispositions for learning, there appears to be a disconnect between early predictors of positive child outcomes (positive dispositions) and children’s life trajectory (developmentally and educationally vulnerable). Further consideration into why regional children outcomes tend to be worse than metropolitan needs to be given, and at what period regional children start to decline in their learning and development. Children’s ecological systems would be a good place to start, as family and community models of educational pursuits could influence children’s own educational pursuits.

The EYLF clearly states that educators adopt specific principles and follow specific practices that serve to promote child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) assert that educators must consider whether their practice is empowering or undermining children’s dispositions, and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly to promote children’s positive dispositions to promote learning and wellbeing. Educators were observed to promote positive dispositions in children, such as curiosity, persistence and enthusiasm, while also managing to curb undesirable dispositions, including intolerance and impatience. This type of educator practice is considered by the NAEYC (2009) appropriate practice in supporting children to become effective learning and promote children’s wellbeing. Furthermore, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) suggests that educators guide children to develop positive dispositions that encourage learning. In this way, educators practice in the current study was found to support children’s sense of wellbeing through appropriate management and empowerment of children’s desirable dispositions.
2.2.2 Supporting children’s wellbeing

Kidsmatter is an Australian mental health and wellbeing initiative that aims to raise children’s feeling of wellbeing in early childhood, middle to late childhood (Department of Health & Aging [DHA], 2012). Kidsmatter incorporates a promotion, prevention and intervention framework to support young children’s mental health and wellbeing. Through this framework it implements training workshops for educators and parents, as well as providing practice strategies and other resources (easily accessible online) that aim to assist educators and parents in supporting children’s wellbeing. As it pertains to the current study, Kidsmatter identify that positive educator-child relationships in ECEC settings are an important contributor to children’s mental health and wellbeing (DHA, 2012).

ECEC settings and educators can support and foster children’s sense of wellbeing, and a strong focus has been on identifying and promoting specific practice that strengthens the wellbeing of young children in Australian ECEC settings (ACECQA, 2013b; DET, 2016). For example, a child-led and -initiated curriculum is currently the focus of Australian ECEC (DEEWR, 2009), which allows children to have a voice and choice about matters that affect them, and sees them as active citizens (Smith, 2008). A focused outcome in the Australian ECEC curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), is that children develop positive wellbeing. The EYLF described how educators could adopt specific practices that will support children’s wellbeing outcomes in the early years (see section 2.4.3 for a detailed description of the EYLF).

In ECEC, emotional warmth, consistency of care, caregiver responsiveness and the development of secure attachments to caregivers is of great importance to
children’s emotional wellbeing and development (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015; Whitebread, 2012). Connectedness between adults and children has been identified as an important factor for the development of children’s self-esteem (Rolfe & Linke, 2011). It is therefore vital that children have at least one significant adult figure in their lives that they can rely on for warmth, comfort, security and support. Educators are in an excellent position to be this figure for children, especially if the child comes from an abusive or neglectful home (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In Australian ECEC, positive educator-child relationships are considered a key factor that can support children’s wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).

In relation to the current study, the ECEC setting is identified as having both risk and protective factors associated with children’s wellbeing (DHA, 2013). As illustrated in Figure 2.2, risk factors include poor educator-child relationships, and protective factors include positive educator-child relationships and quality ECEC settings.

**Figure 2.2: ECE risk and protective factors of child wellbeing**

Positive educator-child relationships are considered to be the building blocks for children’s wellbeing (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008; Statham & Chase, 2010). When unpacking wellbeing, elements that are regularly associated with wellbeing include self-esteem, self-concept, resilience and emotional regulation; these have all been found to be fostered by positive educator-child relationships. For example, an important longitudinal study conducted by Arend, Gove and Sroufe (1979) found that children who were securely attached to their primary caregiver at 18 months had higher levels of resiliency in preschool. Also, more recent research has found a link between secure attachment and children’s emotion regulation and understanding of emotions (Howes, 2000b). Furthermore, educator-child relationships have been found to predict children’s positive self-concept (Verschueren, Doumen & Buyse, 2012). Children who have a positive self-concept are better able to communicate their feelings to adults, due to an increased understanding of their emotions (Waters, Virmani, Thompson, Meyer, Raikes & Jochem, 2010).

It has been found that young people consider the quality of their relationships with others to be one of three main indicators of their wellbeing (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; Layard & Dunn, 2009). These findings, however, have been a result of research with older children, whereas the current study focuses on children from birth to 3 years old. There is limited research on infants and young children’s wellbeing (Statham & Chase, 2010), a deficit the current research aimed to address.

Measuring and monitoring child wellbeing has gained momentum over the years (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Graham, 2011). Of special consideration are children being
raised in regional areas of Australia, where levels of child wellbeing are considered to be at risk, compared to their metropolitan counterparts (McCallum & Price, 2016).

2.3 Theories and understandings of relationships

Human relationships have provoked curiosity amongst theorists for over a century, and children’s relationships with significant adults are consistently acknowledged as being vital in the early years for children’s development and emotional wellbeing (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dolby, 2007; Erikson, 1950). These act first as a survival mechanism, and second as a socio-cultural necessity essential for children to actively engage in their world and develop into functioning members of society. As relationships are considered such an important factor in the first five years of life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), most theories that inform the early childhood sector ruminate on the nature and function of these relationships, and how they shape children’s development (Gesell, 1925; Piaget, 1969; Skinner, 1953; Vygotsky, 1978). For the purpose of the current study, these theories were all considered for their appropriateness in providing a theoretical perspective that served to inform and frame the research.

Freud was one of the first theorists to assert the position that relationships experienced in the early years have lifelong implications (Freud, 1961). Freud’s work with the id, ego and superego presented the foundation for psychoanalysis in the early 1900’s. This theory was considered revolutionary, as Freud postulated the significance of early childhood experiences on the development of the mind, with relationships playing a key role in on the psyche.
Freud (1961) stated that the Id reflects biological, primal instincts required in order to sustain life. These drives were considered to be working unconsciously, and considered a representation of our desires. Instinctively, the Id is driving an infant to satisfy their need for food, warmth and comfort – amongst other things. In the early months of life, this need could only be met by an adult caregiver, typically the mother or father. As it relates to this study, ECEC educators are now in a position be the caregiver capable of meeting these primal needs to satisfy infants. When these needs were met, the infant would gain pleasure, and when these needs were not met, the infant would feel pain. An association was then made between responsive caregiving and the individual giving the care, and so a relationship, positive or negative, would be formed. This relationship would later be theorised by Freud to be extremely influential to the child both short and long term.

Through the modification of the id, the ego would rise and begin to become the visible, or conscious, drive to meet ones needs. The id working on its own is recognised as an unrealistic and unreasonable entity, whereas the ego develops as a reasonable force, driven by common sense. The initial development of the ego is described by Freud (1961) as ‘feeble’, being influenced by environmental and social experiences. The functional importance of the ego is that it is able to satisfy the demands of the id in more socially acceptable ways, often by postponing desire and satisfaction in a way to avoid negative repercussions (Freud, 1961). This is learnt through the demands of the environment, and so the ego can develop in different ways, to become more or less effective, based on the experiences the child has within any given environment. Caregiver responsiveness is an example that illustrates this point, in that how educators respond to children’s demands
contribute towards learned behaviours. If a child is given the opportunity to develop autonomy and resilience through thoughtful interactions and modelling, their ego would develop in a way that could satisfy the primal desires of the id in socially desirable ways.

The ego, like Id, was considered by Freud (1961) to be shaped through the interactions of the child’s primary caregivers and environment, and mothers (especially) were seen to be having an enormous impact on how the child moves through this stage. For example, if the caregiver responded to the child in nurturing and consistent ways, the child would successfully move through this stage of development without damaging repercussions to their development. If the caregiver responded in inconsistent, harsh or demeaning ways to the child, it was postulated by Freud that the child would have problems in later life specifically related to that period of development.

The resonating conclusion derived from Freud’s theory, as it relates to the current study, is that the id and ego require positive relationships, built upon nurturing responsiveness, in order to ensure children successfully pass through each stage (Freud, 1961). Pertaining to the current study, John Bowlby (1969) considered Freud’s work as he developed attachment theory. Also, Erik Erikson (1950) was strongly influenced by Freud.

Erikson’s psychoanalytic theory (1950) focused on the development of the ego through social and cultural traits. He concentrated on the importance of developing basic virtues that would support a child move through life stages and find a functional place in society. Erikson defines these basic virtues as inherent strengths, which are the potential positive outcomes arising from each crisis stage,
and that these collectively form the basic elements of society. Primary caregivers, and the relationships they have with children, were considered to hold an important role in supporting children move through each stage, and in many ways were considered responsible for how the child develops and who the child becomes. As it relates to the current study, ECEC educators are argued as being significant primary caregivers in the lives of children from birth to 3 years old, and therefore have the capacity to influence children as they pass through each stage. Erikson’s (1950) eight stages of development include: 1) Trust vs mistrust (birth-1 year); 2) autonomy vs shame (1-3-years); 3) initiative vs guilt (3-5-years); 4) industry vs inferiority (5-12 years); 6) ego identity vs role confusion (12-18-years); 7) generativity vs stagnation (40-56-years); and 8) ego integrity vs despair (65-years and above).

Relevant to the current study, which solely focused on children from birth to 3 years old, are: stage 1) trust versus mistrust (basic virtue = hope); and stage 2) autonomy versus shame (basic virtue = will). Trust versus mistrust occurs in the first year of life, where infants are solely reliant on adults to meet their basic needs (Bowlby, 1969). When the infants’ needs are responded to in consistent, nurturing and predictable ways, the child develops a sense of trust (Erikson, 1950). This leads the child to develop hope, and enables them to move onto the next stage of development. If the child’s needs are not met, or are met through unreliable, inconsistent and unpredictable responses from their caregivers, the infant will develop a sense of mistrust. The significance of this occurrence is that the child will then move onto the next stage of development having formed a sense of mistrust in their world, and this results in the child lacking in confidence and limits their ability to explore their world in order to develop autonomy and independence, and build
relationships with others. Looking further ahead, the negative consequences of not moving successfully through each stage may include addictive personality, depression and social withdrawal (Erikson, 1950). The importance of children establishing a positive relationship with their primary caregivers is essential as they move through these stages, and ECEC educators are considered to be significant attachment figures in children’s lives (Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

The second stage is shame versus doubt. In this stage, the child is starting to develop a sense of independence and autonomy, and this is essential to their development. As it relates to the current study, in this stage, educators must encourage the child to explore their world independently, and support them in their attempt to undertake tasks by themselves in a way that strengthens their sense of self (Erikson, 1950). If educators stifle the child’s attempt to assert themselves independently, by being overly controlling or critical, the child will suffer from a lack of self-esteem, resulting in a sense of shame about themselves. Again, if this occurs, it will carry over onto the child’s next stage of development. In terms of life outcomes, traits resulting from a sense of shame include obsessiveness, impulsiveness and compulsiveness.

Within Erikson’s eight stages (1950), we see the important role that significant adults play in supporting children to acquire the necessary skill sin each stage to attain success. The relationships held between significant adults and children play a crucial role in the child moving successfully through each stage. As it pertains to the current study, educators are acknowledged as significant adults in children’s lives, and the educator-child relationship can therefore provide support to children as they move through this stage. This is an important consideration of the
current study, as a significant amount of children in the birth to 3 years age bracket are attending ECEC settings in Australia (ABS, 2010). This means that educators in Australia have the potential to influence children’s life trajectories in significant ways, based on their ability to form positive relationships that serve to provide appropriate support and responsiveness to children that will enable them to successfully move through life stages.

The function of early child relationships has also been well described by behaviourism theory (Skinner, 1953), with dependant connotations evident, denoting helplessness on behalf of the child. Additionally, behaviourists suggest that the root of secure attachment lies in the primal drive of hunger, and that attachment behaviours are learnt, not biologically pre-programmed (Dollard & Miller, 1950), as Bowlby suggested (1969). Behaviourism theory posits that any caregiver who satisfies the child’s hunger needs can be the focus of the child’s attachment, thereby overlooking the emotional significance of early relationships. The idea of satisfying hunger as the main factor in the development of attachment has been controverted by influential animal studies undertaken by Harlow (1958) and Lorenz (1935), and it does not explain why attachment behaviours are found in adults, when there is no reliance on another person to source food for oneself. As such, Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969/1973/1980) moved beyond previous theories asserted by both psychoanalytic and behavioural theory to form attachment theory.

While other theories that inform early relationships are respected for their merit, they were disregarded in favour of Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory. Most likely, there is more to consider when identifying the reason for early attachments than these behavioural theories suggests, and it is believed by the researcher that
Bowlby’s theory of attachment offers a more logical explanation for the roots of attachment – a secure base that aims to meet many of the child’s needs, beyond food. Additionally, Ainsworth (1969) points out that Bowlby introduced the term *attachment* as a distinction from the previous dependency view on children’s early relationships, as he claimed attachment did not denote immaturity or helplessness, but rather security. Furthermore, attachment theory is the most widely accepted attachment perspective in early childhood research (Berk & Meyers, 2016), and is most commonly associated with studies on human relationships. After careful deliberation, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1973/1980) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) were considered most appropriate for the current study, for their ability to consider relationships positioned within the child’s environmental context.

### 2.3.1 Attachment Theory

... To say of a child that he is attached to, or has an attachment to, someone means that he is strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure (Bowlby, 1982, p. 371).

Attachment is considered a lasting bond or enduring relationship between two people (Ainsworth, 1978), and this perspective will be considered when examining educator-child relationships throughout the literature review.

The main issue presented in this research is the phenomenon of human connectedness – specifically in the instance of children’s early relationships with significant adults. Why do we feel connected with some and disconnected with others? This is a question that holds relevance to countless experiences that shape
the human existence – the workplace, the school environment, community groups, sporting activities and, for the purpose of this research, ECEC.

Literature argues the importance of young children’s relationships on their development, wellbeing and future adult relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1950; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo & Meyers, 1988; Pianta, 1997; Shonkoff, 2006). As identified in the previous discussion on psychoanalytic theory, ECEC educators are considered to be significant adults in a child’s life. It is therefore reasonable to argue that the educator-child relationship is so important as to have lifelong impacts on children’s lives:

... Infant attachment is critical, both because of its place in initiating pathways of development and because of its connection with so many critical developmental functions – social relatedness, arousal modulation, emotional regulation, and curiosity, to name just a few. Attachment experiences remain, even in this complex view, vital in the formation of the person (Sroufe, 2005, p. 365).

2.3.1.1 The purpose of attachment

John Bowlby, a man who by his own accounts suffered disconnectedness from his mother, sought to understand the very basis of child attachment, and its significance on human development. Influenced by Darwin (1859) and Freud (1961), Bowlby presented his theory of attachment in the mid-to-late 1900s (Bowlby, 1969/1973/1980).

At the very core of Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969) rests the young child’s evolutionary need to develop an attachment to a caregiver who is capable of
providing them with basic needs for the purpose of protection and security (Darwin, 1859), thereby ensuring survival. Bowlby’s attachment theory postulates that humans enter the world with a repertoire of biologically pre-programmed and instinctual responses and behaviours that act to support attachment to a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). This attachment will serve as a survival mechanism, incorporating “reproductive behaviour, paternal behaviour, feeding, and exploratory behaviour” (Ainsworth, 1985, p. 772), and as humans develop it will also provide them with a sense of belongingness.

Providing a food source, as well as providing modelling for children to acquire life skills through proximity and observations of their primary caregiver, were considered by Bowlby (1969) as potential contributing factors of attachment. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs (see Figure 2.3) stipulates that children are motivated by the need to have their basic needs met, such as food and shelter, and then require support to attain other needs of security, love, warmth and belonging (Nixon & Gould, 1999, p. 18).

![Figure 2.3: Hierarchy of human needs](image)

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs suggest that the attainment of each level is acquired in a linear fashion; for example, basic needs must first be met before security or belonging can be attained. In this instance, attachment to a significant adult that can support children to meet their needs is a necessity in the early years. Furthermore, being securely connected to another human is one of our basic human needs (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

While meeting one’s basic needs is acknowledged by Bowlby’s attachment theory, he disregards the notion that it provides a pivotal role in attachment, and instead rates it as a low-level trait (Bowlby, 1982). Supporting Bowlby’s disregard for feeding as the primary drive for attachment are the results from Harlow’s research with rhesus monkeys in the 1950s. In one study, Harlow and Zimmerman (1959) removed infant monkeys from their mothers, and placed them with two monkey ‘mothers’, one made from wire and the other made from cloth. The wire monkey was equipped with nothing more than a feeding bottle attached to its front, while the other cloth monkey was made of soft cloth, but did not always have feeding instruments attached. The study measured the amount of time the infant monkeys spent with each ‘mother’, and found that infants were spending the majority of their time (up to 22 hours per day) with the cloth monkey, only going over to the feeding monkey to satisfy their hunger; they were therefore found to be more attached to the cloth ‘mother’ (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959).

Lorenz’s imprinting experiment (1935) also informed and supported Bowlby’s theory, in that attachment is innate and genetically pre-programmed, and does not focus on feeding. In Lorenz’s experiment, goose eggs were divided into two groups: some were placed with the mother goose, and others with Lorenz. Lorenz observed
that, upon hatching, the group paired with the mother started to follow her around, whereas the group that was hatched by Lorenz started to follow him around. Lorenz then grouped all the geese together in a box, and noted that when they were released, they would reliably segregate towards their mother or Lorenz, depending on who they were first exposed to. Lorenz termed this phenomenon as ‘imprinting’, and noted that it occurred very quickly after hatching (12-17 hours). Lorenz’s classic ‘goose imprinting’ experiment supports the basic nature of attachment as a pre-programmed, innate instinct that is not influenced by food. Furthermore, based on the observable time frame in which imprinting occurs (only within 12-17-hours from hatching), Lorenz’s experiment led to the notion that there are critical periods in early development, and this idea has since been vehemently supported by researchers (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Additionally, Lorenz’s findings showed that once the goslings had been imprinted on, they could not be imprinted on by anyone else, and that the original imprinting could not be reversed.

Harlow and Zimmerman’s (1959) and Lorenz’s (1935) results certainly support Bowlby’s theory that attachment stems from innate and pre-programmed behaviours and instincts, with Seay and Harlow (1965, p. 434) noting the separation behaviours of animals bear “striking” similarities Bowlby’s separation phases. Furthermore, recent work in neurobiology supports Bowlby’s premises that

... attachment is instinctual behaviour with a biological function, that emotional processes lie at the foundation of a model of instinctive behaviour, and that a biological control system can now be identified as the orbitofrontal system and its cortical and subcortical connections (Schore, 2000, p. 23).
It is therefore well established that the intrinsic motivation to form an attachment is not simply to have one’s basic needs of food, water and shelter met, but to develop a nurturing bond with another human being that will serve to provide security and protection for survival. The nature of attachments experienced by children serves to inform development, wellbeing, and future relationships, and influence life outcomes. This is the position upheld by the current study, which investigated children’s relationships with educators, and how they are influencing their wellbeing.

2.3.1.2 Attachment figures

Bowlby (1969) asserted that the main attachment figure in a child’s life will typically be the mother, and this this relationship is the most critically influential on the developing child. It is suggested that a mother is biologically wired to respond to her child’s survival needs, and provide protection to her child at the risk of her own life (Bowlby, 1982). The innate instinct to respond to a biological child is an unconscious, evolutionary trait that stems from a person’s need to ensure their own survival and the endurance of the species through the survival of their offspring (Weiten, 2002). While the importance of the mother-child attachment is continually restated throughout Bowlby’s work, he notes that the attachment classification obtained through this relationship acts as a prototype for all future relationships. In this case, Bowlby conceded that other significant adults in children’s lives can become attachment figures, but he maintained that these attachments will not be of the same intensity or importance, and will be built upon the child’s existing working model (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1973) asserts that the success of a ‘mother’ substitute becoming an attachment figure predicates on the caregiver being able to
adapt his or her behaviours in a way that makes the child feel safe and secure, and that this is usually most successful when the child establishes familiarity with that person (1973). Furthermore, to optimise the success educator-child relationships, it is suggested that children be above the age of 9 months, as by this time they would have formed a primary attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and be in a better position to form a secondary attachment (Bowlby, 2007).

Research has shown that it is not only plausible, but likely that children will be attached to many other important figures by the time they are 18 months old (Ainsworth, 1963; Rutter, 1972; Shaffer & Emmerson, 1964a). These attachment figures can be a father, sibling, educator or friend, amongst others. Ultimately, Bowlby’s (1969) focus on the mother-child attachment was challenged by other researchers, which resulted in recognition that the attachment’s children form with other significant adults in their lives can be just as meaningful and influential (Rutter, 1979). Howes and Ritchie (2002) assert that educator-child attachments form in similar ways to mother-child attachments, and that the quality of these relationships influences children’s development (p. 3).

Research has investigated if a child’s ability to form secure relationships with their mother or father may determine their ability to form secure relationships with their ECEC educator. Cugmas (2007) analysed the relationships between 178 kindergarten children and their mother, father, and kindergarten teacher. The research aimed to determine if a child’s relationships with their parent influenced the teacher-child relationship. There was no evidence that the attachment quality between a mother and child, or father and child, had any impact on the child’s relationship with their educator. This finding indicates that regardless of the
attachment a child has with their parent, there is always the opportunity for educators to form secure attachments to children.

As a basic requirement of becoming an attachment figure for children is sensitive responsiveness (Rolfe & Linke, 2011): when children exhibit attachment behaviours, educators must respond in consistent, nurturing and appropriate ways that serve to meet the child’s needs (Bowlby, 1969). Furthermore, positive interactions, through quality verbal exchanges, need to occur to strengthen the attachment (Kostelnik et al., 2015). The aforementioned requirements of attachment also need to be occurring within the child’s immediate environment, where the child is frequently engaged and immersed – for example, the ECEC setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, ECEC educators can be considered attachment figure for young children (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

Research has been undertaken to determine the difference in mother-child, father-child and educator-child attachment. Goossens and Van IJzendoorn (1990) observed 75 infants using the Strange Situation experiment with their mother, father, and ECEC educator. Results showed educator-child attachment did not differ significantly from mother-child or father-child attachment. The study also revealed that children who were more securely attached to their educator spent more time per week in ECEC. When considering why children are able to form secure attachments to educators, Goossens and Van IJzendoorn suggest, as a possible explanation, that educators may respond faster to children’s distress than parents, and are less likely to have competing demands for the child’s attention in ECEC. This is especially true when considering the small group sizes recently implemented in ECEC through national reforms (COAG, 2009), which allow for more one-on-one
interactions between children and educators, and a quicker response to children’s needs. These are important aspects to consider when determining educator-child relationships in ECEC.

In a study by Howes and Hamilton (1992b) 110 children were observed with their mothers during ECEC arrivals and departures, 403 children were observed with their ECEC educators, and 72 children were observed with both their mother and educator. 73% of children were classified as securely attached to their educator, with 14% avoidant and 13% ambivalent. Children who were securely attached received more caregiver involvement and responsiveness. Children classified as avoidant experienced harshness and detachment from their caregivers. Children in the ambivalent category received less sensitivity and involvement than the secure classified children, but more than the avoidant. These findings suggest that a significant number of children in ECEC will form secure attachments with educators, resulting in increased responsiveness. The alarming result, however, is that children who do not form secure attachments with educators will experience detachment and harsh interactions from educators. It is unclear from this research what causes these avoidant and ambivalent attachments: are educators harsh and detached because they could not form a secure attachment with children, or did the failure to form secure attachment result from the educators’ harshness and detachment? This conundrum exemplifies the bi-directional nature at play in educator-child relationships. Overall, in ECEC, research has found that the majority of children will go on to develop secure attachments to their educators (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b).

Conversely, Ahnert, Pinquart and Lamb (2006) conducted a meta-analysis, combining the results of 40 international investigations on 2,867 children and their interactions with mothers and educators.
attachment to educators, which were assessed using either the Strange Situation or the Attachment Q-Sort, to determine the security of children’s relationships with non-parental educators. They found only 42% of children were securely attached to their ECEC educators. This is a far less optimistic indicator. It should be noted that secure attachment to educators was more commonly found in earlier studies. Ahnert and colleagues (2006) suggest this could be due to changes taking place in the ECEC field, where more focus has been placed upon educational, rather than emotional, objectives in order to prepare children for school.

The current study adopted the perspective that ECEC educators can become attachment figures for children, and that this would become a platform for the development and maintenance of educator-child relationships. This perspective was supported by the literature, which consistently asserts that children’s educators can be considered attachment figures, and that this influences educator-child relationships (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Howes, Galinsky & Kontos, 1998; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Ebbeck and Yim articulate this perspective well, as they claim that “Establishing a secure attachment is one of the ways that caregivers in child-care centres foster positive relationships with infants/toddlers” (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009, p. 899). ECEC educators are positioned in an ideal space, where children are currently spending a significant amount of time in the early years (ABS, 2010). Previous research has examined aspects of educator-child relationships through attachment theory (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Pianta, 1997), and so does the current study.


2.3.1.3 Attachment behaviours

In order to comprehensively understand attachment theory, one needs to consider the ways in which children form attachments in the first years of life. Bowlby (1969) states that “attachment behaviour is regarded as a class of social behaviour of an importance equivalent to that of mating behaviour and parenting behaviour. It is held to have a biological function specific to itself and one that has hitherto been little considered” (p. 224). Attachment behaviours change over time, from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood, however they remain an important part of human lifespan (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment behaviours are evident as instinctual from birth as they are considered by Bowlby (1969) to be biologically pre-programmed, and so young infants will display a variety of instinctual attachment behaviours in an attempt to maintain proximity to a primary caregiver in order to develop a secure attachment, necessary for survival (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment behaviours include crying, calling, smiling, mutual gaze, following and clinging (Bowlby, 1969, pp. 330-353), all of which aim to remain in proximity with a primary caregiver to maintain proximity for security and comfort, as well as ensuring that needs are met (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Neurologically, a rapid response occurs in one of the brain reward systems, the orbitofrontal cortex, when adults look at infant faces (Kringelbach, Stark, Alexander, Bornstein & Stein, 2016) and hear infant noises (cooing, babbling, laughing) (Kringelbach et al., 2016). Children possess particular traits (round cheeks, large eyes, small nose, large forehead and symmetry) that elicit important attachment behaviours from adults, including the desire to hold, touch, play with and talk to (Sherman & Haidt, 2011). These serve to facilitate attachment by promoting proximity between the child and the attachment figure.
Bowlby (1969) asserted that proximity-promoting attachment behaviours are especially prevalent when a child feels distressed or alarmed, which has been supported by research (Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Harlow, 1958): “The predictable outcome of a child’s attachment behaviour is to bring him in closer proximity with other people, and particularly with that specific individual who is primarily responsible for his care” (Ainsworth, 1978, p. 6). In this way, a child is most likely to employ a variety of attachment behaviours in order to ensure a secure attachment to their primary caregiver is attained. As stated previously, this primary caregiver is usually the mother, however, this is not always the case, with some children having several attachment figures (Goldberg, 2000; Rutter, 1972; Shaffer & Emmerson, 1964a). As has been noted, ECEC educators are in a prime position to become a significant attachment figure, as they are responsible for responding to children’s attachment behaviours to meet their needs within the ECEC setting.

Educator stability can promote educator-child relationships. Barnas and Cummings (1994) investigated the responses of toddlers to stable and non-stable ECEC educators. Forty children were observed for over 180 hours with educators that were deemed stable and non-stable (based upon attendance records), with stable educators having spent twice as much time with the child than non-stable educators. They found that children, when distressed, would more often display attachment behaviours towards their stable educator. Stable educators were also more likely than non-stable educators to respond to children’s needs. Additionally, they discovered that stable educators were more effective at settling distressed children. This study demonstrated that educator stability is certainly positively associated with educator-child relationships, and that attempts should be made to
minimise staff turnover to support relationships. Complementing these findings, Howes and Hamilton (1992a) conducted a longitudinal study which explored educator-child relationships. They found that teacher-child relationship quality remained stable in children, so long as the teacher remained the same. Conversely, if the teacher changed, children displayed unstable attachment behaviours towards teachers, lasting until 30 months, before stabilising again. Recchia’s (2012) research also arrived at the same conclusion, recognising that children enjoyed a more positive relationship with educators they were familiar with.

Educators must be more than simply ‘present’ in a child’s life to ensure a secure attachment, and so they must be both physically and emotionally available to children in the ECEC setting (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Kostelnik et al., 2015). How educators respond to children’s attachment behaviours provides the most important aspect of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). If children receive consistent, predictable, and nurturing responses to their behaviours, it is more likely that they will attain secure attachments to others, as they develop a secure working model of attachment. However, if children receive inconsistent, unpredictable, harsh and neglectful responses to their behaviours, it is far less likely that a secure attachment to the adult will occur (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969).

Children develop an internal working model of attachment in their early years, informed by the responses received from their primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Bowlby’s attachment theory predicated that the responses children receive from a primary caregiver based on their attachment behaviours filter down into an inner working model that supports children’s social understanding of the world around them and the people within it.
Figure 2.4 illustrates the possible outcomes children can experience, depending on the type of responsiveness they receive from their primary caregiver, and through this, what type of attachment they can expect to have with that person.

![Diagram of attachment theory]

**Figure 2.4: Child’s inner working model**


A child’s internal working model is then used when forming attachment with others. Following this instinctual design, attachment theory postulates that children will use their attachment with significant adults to form relationships that help to organise their social experiences (Howes, 2000b), which in turn allows them to feel safe and secure enough to happily explore their environment (Bowlby, 1982). As a result, children are better able to develop important life skills (such as communication skills, negotiation skills, problem solving skills and social skills) and establish a sense of the world and their place within it (Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

Attachment as a secure base was evidenced by another of Harlow’s studies (1958), which investigated attachment through fear responses. In this study, where
rhesus monkeys were reared by either a feeding wire ‘mother’ or non-feeding cloth ‘mother’, Harlow introduced frightening stimuli to the infant, such as loud noises and intruders, and found that in distressing situations the monkeys raised by the cloth monkey would run to seek comfort with the latter. Once they had established their security, they then would cautiously explore the object that initially caused their distress. The same was not found of the monkeys raised by the wire monkey. These monkeys would not seek comfort from the wire monkey, and instead would cower from the distressing object and scream, never attempting to explore the object (Harlow, 1958). Harlow’s research findings support Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969/1973/1980), which described the need for children to form attachments to significant adults in order to have a secure base from which they can confidently explore their environment.

Having an understanding of children’s attachment behaviours, why children display these behaviours and how to respond appropriately to them could assist educators to develop their responsiveness to said behaviours. Being well informed of attachment theory could thereby be identified as a factor that influences educator-child relationships through secure attachment. Educators’ responsiveness, appropriateness, quality of verbal exchanges and positive interactions were measured in the current study for their influence on educator-child relationships.

2.3.1.4 Attachment phases

A comprehensive understanding of attachment behaviours serves to inform appropriate practice that supports secure attachment, and therefore the development of positive relationships. What is also important to understand is that children do not become instantly attached to any adult, and Bowlby (1969) identified
four specific phases of attachment (evident through attachment behaviours) that children go through in their pursuit for a secure attachment, though he noted that there are no sharp boundaries between them (p. 320).

Figure 2.5 briefly identifies each of the four stages, and provides indicators of typical behaviours found within each stage. Based on these four phases of attachment, the age where attachment is at its most fragile is between 6 and 9 months. At this age, children are aware of the absence of their attachment figure, and will protest vehemently at being separated from this figure (Bowlby, 1982). The forming of new attachments in this age group can therefore be problematic (McCain & Mustard, 1999), as they will be nestled in attachment phase 3, where they are less trusting of strangers, and they protest more vehemently to being separated from their attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). However, the 6- to 9-month age is precisely the period in which most children begin their out of home care experience – largely in a ECEC setting (2011). The age, and therefore stage, of the child is one factor examined for its influence on educator-child relationships in the current study.

![Figure 2.5: Four phases of attachment](image)

During the third ‘specific’ attachment phase, educators need to pay particular attention to children’s attachment behaviours, and respond in reliable and nurturing ways, so that the child can develop a sense of consistency and trust in their educator. As illustrated in Figure 2.5, beyond the age of 10-months old, when children have moved to attachment phase 4 (multiple attachments), they are capable of having multiple attachments. This notion was supported by research conducted in Scotland by Schaffer and Emerson (1964a), who found that by the time a child reached 18 months, they were seen to show attachment behaviours towards at least one other family member, and often several. By the time a child has reached the age of three, they are able to feel secure with other adult figures in strange places. This, of course, depends largely on the attachment classification of the child.

2.3.1.5 **Attachment classification**

Different to attachment behaviour (which is essentially a child’s way of attempting to secure an attachment to a primary caregiver through proximity) or attachment phases (which describe certain periods of attachment that children move through), attachment classification defines the type of attachment a child has with their attachment figure. Table 2.1 outlines the four attachment classifications put forth by Mary Ainsworth (1978), including: 1) secure; 2) insecure/avoidant; 3) insecure/resistant; and 4) insecure/disorganised-disorientated.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment Classification</th>
<th>Behavioural traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Child is interested in their environment, and will explore it freely in the presence of their attachment figure. They show preference for their attachment figure and return to their attachment figure when distressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure/Avoidant</td>
<td>Child shows no preference for the attachment figure, often ignoring and turning away from them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure/Resistant</td>
<td>Child has difficulty moving away from their attachment figure to explore their surroundings, and are not easily comforted when distressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure/Disorganised-Disorientated</td>
<td>Child appears apprehensive of their attachment figure, often displaying contradictory behaviours towards them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Typically, securely attached children have the best outcomes; insecure/avoidant and insecure/resistant attached children fall in the middle, leaving insecure/disorganised attachment with the most negative outcomes (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969).

While a child’s attachment classification is said to have lifelong impacts (Bowlby, 1969), it is possible for it to change over time. A study by Lewis, Feiring and Rosenthal (2000) examined the continuity in attachment classification of 84 children from the age of 12 months to 18 years. The Strange Situation was used to measure mother-child attachment at 12 months of age (71% secure, 29% insecure), followed by the Adult Attachment Interview being conducted at 18 years of age. The findings revealed no significant continuity in attachment from 12 months to 18 years. Of the 29% of children classified as insecure, 43% were rated as securely attached at 18 years. Furthermore, of the 71% of children classified as having secure mother-child attachment at 12 months, 43% rated as insecurely attached at 18. This finding seems to oppose the suggestion that infant mother-child attachment has continuity.
through the years, despite the sample size being too small to be representative of a wider population.

Bowlby (1969) noted that attachments were of vital importance in the first five years of life, and that if children do not experience secure attachment to at least one adult, they are at risk of suffering from damaging outcomes, including heightened aggression, fractured adult relationships, reduced intelligence and affectionless psychopathy (Bowlby, 1969). As it relates to the current study, ECEC educators are in a position to become an attachment figure for children. This would be especially important for vulnerable children who have yet to establish a secure attachment, since positive educator-child relationships are known to be a protective factor.

2.3.1.6  A secure base

Ainsworth first described that a secure attachment provides a secure base for children’s confident exploration (1967). After presenting attachment theory as the main theoretical framework for the current study, a practical model of attachment theory the circle of security, applicable to the field of ECEC in Australia, is presented below. This will serve to demonstrate how attachment theory could be used to inform a research project that looked at educator-child relationships in the context of ECEC settings, such as the current study.

The Circle of Security was developed by Dolby (2007), who specialises in infant mental health and wellbeing. The intention of the Circle of Security is to assert the importance of early relationships on children’s sense of wellbeing and on their learning. The Circle of Security endeavours to deliver this message to significant stakeholders with the provision of a user-friendly model or ‘map’ that parents and
educators can use in order to build positive relationships with young children by meeting children’s relationship needs.

Inherently informed by Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), the Circle of Security is perfectly suited to guide educators working with children, as it supports educators’ understandings of attachment behaviours, and outlines how to respond appropriately to these (Dolby, 2007; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). The Circle of Security is broken down into two spaces, as seen in Figure 2.6: 1) a secure base and 2) a safe haven. It is suggested that educators consider how they are providing a Circle of Security for children in the ECEC setting.

A secure base requires adults to be both present and available for children, and is necessary for children to “freely explore and focus on understanding the world around them” (Banham, 2000, p. 39). In educators to provide children with this
secure base for exploration, a sense of trust must be established, based on consistent and predictable responses to children’s behaviour and social cues. The secure base provides a strong foundation for children’s experiences. When children have established a sense of security in their educator, they can move away from the adult into their environment and have the confidence to explore their world freely with the knowledge that they are protected and supported by their caregiver (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Howes & Ritchie, 2002). In this space, children will share their discoveries and joys with their educator when they interact with their environment. The secure base emphasises the importance of quality and supportive educator practice, where educators are attuned to children’s needs and respond appropriately (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006). Research has affirmed that a secure base is an important aspect of the educator-child relationships (Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and that secure attachment promotes infant and toddler exploration (Stupica, Sherman & Cassidy, 2011).

The safe haven is the space that children can return to when they become overwhelmed, and need comfort and support from the adult. Adults must be both physically and emotionally available to children in this space, in order to establish secure attachment and support the child’s exploration and development (Ainsworth, 1985). Educators must be capable of responding in predictable and nurturing ways if the child should experience fear or distress. The comfort of knowing they have a safe haven to return to is an essential part of this model (Dolby, 2007).

Positive relationships outcomes have come out of a Circle of Security intervention protocol wherein a 20-week parental education intervention is implemented based on the Circle of Security (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell,
2002). It is designed to shift patterns of parent-child interactions towards an appropriate developmental pathway. During this intervention, parents are made to watch recordings of their interactions with their child, and engage in reflective discussion using the Circle of Security to inform their thinking about appropriate interactions. At the conclusion of this intervention, Marvin and colleagues found that there were significant positive changes in the relationship for both the child and the parent. Even though this study was based on mother-child relationships, rather than educator-child, it asserts the effectiveness of the Circle of Security as a basis for relationship development.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and the Circle of Security (Dolby, 2007) coalesce harmoniously to confirm that children require strong relationships with adults in order to confidently explore their world, thereby contributing to their sense of wellbeing and learning. When children engage in their environment, they learn vital skills and knowledge that contribute to the attainment of milestones, developmental outcomes and a sense of wellbeing. Furthermore, Bowlby (1969) specifically pointed out that attachment behaviours in young children are more prominent when children are distressed, and he maintained that the attachment figure’s ability to provide a safe haven for children to freely explore their environment, and a secure base to return to for comfort in times of distress, attributes to the development of young children.

Specific to the current study, the circle of security offers a model, informed by attachment theory, which educators can use to provide children with a secure base and a safe haven in ECEC settings. Educators must ensure they provide a good balance of both a secure base and safe haven. Overusing either space – for example,
over-indulging the child’s need for comfort but not acknowledging their achievements – can be less effective. In the current study, evidence of Circle of Security practice was sought in order to answer the research questions.

Based on the description of attachment theory provided, it is argued by the researcher that attachment theory is a justified selection for the theoretical framework of this research project, as it offers a useful template for understanding the role of educator-child relationships (Schuengel, 2012). In this section of the literature review, the motivation and importance of secure attachments to significant adults has been clearly defined, and described as supporting children’s exploration and development. As it relates to the current study, attachment can be considered a foundation or ‘working model’ to explore how educator-child relationships influence levels of child wellbeing, and the factors that are influencing these relationships in the ECEC setting.

2.3.2 Ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner’s development of ecological systems theory (1979) aimed at describing the development and wellbeing of an individual by adopting “a scientific approach emphasizing the interrelationship off different processes and their contextual variation” (Darling, 2007, p. 203). In his own words, Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines his theory as follows:

... the ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these setting, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (p. 21).
Ecological systems theory considers a multitude of environmental factors and key relationships as having a strong influence on a child’s development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Biological dispositions and environmental forces coalesce within this complex network of systems to influence the child’s life experiences in meaningful ways, thereby shaping the child’s development.

Ecological systems theory identifies four specific levels in order to describe key influential environments that inform the child’s internal and external world as a whole. Figure 2.7 provides a visual representation of some of these environments, and of key relationship figures (such as parents, teachers, siblings, and so on) within the four levels nestled within the ecological system: 1) microsystem; 2) mesosystem; 3) exosystem, and 4) macrosystem. These systems are deconstructed and discussed in relation to the current study in sections 2.3.4.1 to 2.3.4.5.

![Figure 2.7: Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-F_Umkrw8RRk/TSQ4o9zLoWI/AAAAAAAAAAA/2-MijklycOg/s320/rrr-bronfenbrenner1979-systems.gif)
Bronfenbrenner (1979) described children’s relationships with significant adults as bi-directional, being influenced by a myriad of factors, including psychological, behavioural, biological and cultural. Ecological systems theory recognises that these relationships are a key element in all working systems, and so it becomes pertinent for the current study to explore levels of educator-child relationships from an ecological systems perspective. Furthermore, the research questions investigated in the current study goes beyond the need to identify the level of relationships between educators and children, and looks to explore the factors specifically found in ECEC settings that contribute to these levels.

Certainly there are many factors that can contribute to relationships, and many of these factors lie in the environment that the child is immersed in. The most influential of all environments is considered to be the home, where parenting styles and social class are positioned. Children typically spend the most time in this environment, and so will be powerfully influenced by these factors. However, in regards to the current study, investigating influences found in this space was not practical, and outside the scope of the research. Instead, the current study investigated educator-child relationships as they are positioned in another critically important space: the ECEC setting.

Bronfenbrenner (1979), influenced by Freud (1961), Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1969), attempted to understand childhood in the context of environmental influences on development. He saw children as being immersed in various different ecosystems, which interact in meaningful ways to have a profound influence of the child’s development, wellbeing and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In turn, the latter influence the environment, creating a bidirectional relationship between
all working systems, and the relationships held within those systems. This perspective aligned with Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969), which also argued that child relationships are bidirectional and shaped by both biological and environmental factors. What ecological systems theory provides for the current study, by building on attachment theory, is the acknowledgment and understanding of educator-child relationships found in ECEC setting, nestled within the microsystem. When considering how the ECEC environment influences children’s relationships and vice versa, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems provide keen insight into the current study. Each system will be presented below and linked to the current study.

2.3.2.1 **The micro-system**

The micro-system is the direct environmental space that holds the strongest influence over the developing child. This system contains significant people and places that children have direct contact with constantly through their lives. These include parents, sibling, relatives, friends, educators and other people found within the home, ECEC setting and neighbouring environments (Berk & Meyers, 2016). Relationships found within the micro-system are significant, and in many cases attachment relationships, as children have constant social interactions with these key stakeholders in various environmental spaces, including home, school and ECEC settings. The more responsive, nurturing and positive children’s interactions and experiences within the microsystem are, the better the child will develop academically, emotionally and socially, thereby achieving positive life outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001).

Ecological systems theory proposes that children are not only a recipient of the influences found within these environments and the people within them, but
that they are also contributing to their own environment and people within it in a significant way (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children’s interactions with others within this space has a bidirectional effect, meaning that children are contributing to the climate and nature of their micro-system, and influencing the people found within it (Darling, 2007). The child’s characteristics play a part in how children are interacting with others in the microsystem, and therefore in the development of these relationships (Berk & Meyers, 2016). For example, a child’s temperament can influence the way their parents interact with them, which in turns influences the way the parent-child relationship is formed (Churchill, 2003). It is in this case that it becomes possible for children living within the same family to have different life outcomes based on their personal experiences within the micro-system.

Arguably the most influential microsystem is the child’s home. Key influences from within the family unit can be considered as having a role in the child’s development, including parenting styles (Baumrind, 1967), culture, genetics and modelling behaviours (Berk & Meyers, 2016). When parents fail to provide children with a nurturing and reasonably structured home environment, children can be considered at risk of poor developmental outcomes and wellbeing (Evans, 2004).

Beyond the significant parent-child relationship in the home environment, ECEC settings are positioned in the microsystem, and are considered as influential on children’s life experiences and development (ACECQA, 2013a). Educators’ pedagogy and practice, as well as personal characteristics, have an impact on the child’s development and outcomes through relationships (DEEWR, 2009; Kostelnik et al., 2015). For these reasons, the current study investigated educator-child relationships within the ECEC setting, examining educator and child characteristics as well as other
visible factors that seemingly influence these relationships. The current study also
considered how educator-child relationships within the microsystem influence
children’s levels of wellbeing through engagement within this environment.

2.3.2.2 **The mesosystem**

The mesosystem considers the “... relationships formed between the
different components within the microsystem and the quality and frequency of the
interactions between these” (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 117). Bronfenbrenner asserted
that significant stakeholders within these systems shared a great responsibility to
work closely together, as this would serve to improve child outcomes through
enriched environmental experiences across spaces (1979).

Parental perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are influencing children
within the microsystem, and are found to have an impact on educational outcomes
(Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005). For
example, parents’ negative attitudes and views on education could influence the
child’s experiences and perceptions of their education setting, creating barriers.
However, when parents actively participate in children’s educational experience, it
has a positive effect on child outcomes (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). In this space,
parent-teacher partnerships hold great significance in the lives of young children
(Rouse, 2012b), and this factor was investigated for its perceived influence on
educator-child relationships in the ECEC setting.

2.3.2.3 **The exosystem**

The exosystem sees the child interacting within a contextual space, seemingly
unawares. Those positioned within the exosystem are not directly interacting with
children, however they are influencing their relationships, development and
outcomes (Darling, 2007). These spaces can include, but are not limited to, the parents’ workplace, local industry, media and local government. This is evident when considering a parent’s workplace, as its stresses can influence parenting, and the way media sets to influence children’s thinking and desires.

Within the exosystem, the child’s geographical location emerges as a factor that influences child outcomes. As it pertains to the current study, children living in regional areas face a unique set of challenges (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). These include limited access to services, lower likelihood of graduating from high school, high staff turnover in education, lower socio-economic status, and lower social functioning (teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, criminal activity) (McCallum & Price, 2016). In Australia, children growing up in regional area are more at risk of being developmentally vulnerable (AEDC, 2015) across a wide set of domains, and while quality educators can act as a protective factor for vulnerable children, attracting highly trained educators to regional areas is difficult (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). The current study aimed to contribute to the limited body of research undertaken in regional areas, and support quality practice through recommendations stemming from findings related to educator-child relationships and child wellbeing.

2.3.2.4 The macrosystem

The macro-system is the space where social and cultural values and contexts are influencing the child, again without any tangible interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes the laws, religion, customs and cultural values of the society in which the child is living. The macrosystem is the space where beliefs and ideologies
are seen as influential, and the child’s life can be significantly influenced in a positive or negative way depending on the climate of the aforementioned spaces.

In relation to the current study, another important influence in the macrosystem is the Australian government. COAG (2009) recently implemented the early childhood quality reform agenda, which saw the implementation of new regulations, a new accrediting system and a new national curriculum, aimed at raising the quality of all ECEC settings in Australia (COAG, 2009). These changes came about without any direct contact with children, however they are seen to have a major influence on their experiences in ECEC settings, and therefore their development (ACECQA, 2013a). The current study investigated some factors associated with the COAG quality reform agenda for their influence on educator-child relationships. A more in-depth presentation of quality ECEC in Australia, and the quality reform agenda, is presented in section 2.4.

Cultural values of society will inevitably be unique between different spaces, and societal expectations and influences do change rapidly throughout the ages (Wyness, 2012). For example, society has moved towards a space where women are an accepted part of the workforce, which has resulted in more children attending ECEC settings (ABS, 2010); this in turn has made ECEC setting attendance a socially acceptable occurrence in the early years of life (Wyness, 2012). In this way, we see the government as having an influence in this space, and as stipulated by Bronfenbrenner, all networks are powerfully interrelated and are influencing the developing child in many significant ways.
2.3.2.5 The chronosystem

The chronosystem includes the transitional space of a child’s life. Significant changes and transitions in one’s life, such as divorce, international relocation or trauma, are considered as influential from this space. Socially, factors such as war and economic turmoil can be positioned here. It is also considered as an ongoing transitional space, as children move through different stages of life, meaning that human ecology changes over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Significantly, children’s early experiences are known to have lifelong impacts (Mustard, 2006), and the relationships children experience during the first years of life influence their life trajectory.

As a theoretical perspective, ecological systems theory was found to align flawlessly with the current study. Often, ecological systems theory is linked with attachment theory (Aubrey & Riley, 2016), as they both strongly assert the importance of child relationships. Similar to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory states that all of children’s relationships at an early age are bi-directional, and that early relationships acquired in the microsystem set the foundation for future relationships, learning, and life outcomes (1979). Furthermore, ecological systems theory considers early relationships to have significant impacts on children’s development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and wellbeing research often uses ecological systems theory as a theoretical framework (ARACY, 2010; Earls & Carlson, 2001). This was relevant, as the current study focused not only on educator-child relationships, but also on how these relationships are influencing children’s levels of wellbeing.
Ecological systems theory provides support for this research through its focus on educator-child relationships within the microsystem, and where children develop their sense of wellbeing.

2.4 Quality early childhood education and care in Australia

In a presentation of literature that unpacks quality ECEC, it is important to recognise key studies that have been undertaken internationally over the past decade that examine various aspects of ECEC that inform quality, such as the Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart, 2005) and the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (Sylva et al., 2004). These projects investigated a myriad of factors that influence quality ECEC; however, they focused only on preschool-aged children. As the current study focused solely on children from birth to 3 years old, the findings from the aforementioned projects will not be analysed and presented in this review, as they hold little weight for understandings of quality ECEC in the birth to 3 years age group.

It now firmly accepted that the first five years of life are vital for a positive life trajectory (COAG, 2009; DEEWR, 2009; Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Within these five years, children’s morals, personality, ethics and behaviours are established (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Neurological connections are also made that ultimately provide the foundation for lifelong learning (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006).

It is well publicised that high quality ECEC care plays an important role in improving educational and development outcomes for young children (Elliot, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004). Research has consistently shown that high quality ECEC is a strong
determinant for positive childhood outcomes (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Schweinhart, 2005; Sylva et al., 2010), specifically for children’s language (Burchinal, Howes, Pianta, Bryant, Early, Clifford & Barbarin, 2008), social-emotional development (Bornstein, Hahn, Gist & Haynes, 2006) and cognitive development (Kean, 2007). Additionally, high-quality care has been found to improve children’s behaviour (Pianta et al., 2005). Conversely, researchers have found that low quality ECEC often results in negative child outcomes (Keane, 2007; Van Beijsterveldt, Hudziak, & Boomsma, 2005), and can be considered a risk factor for vulnerable children (Vermeer & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008). In order to ensure children receive quality ECEC, meaningful investment needs to be made into the sector.

The importance of investing in the early years is gaining worldwide momentum and recognition. As well as providing significant financial returns on investment in the early years (Heckman, 2000), it is argued that this investment has the potential to:

- Reduce the proportion of populations living in poverty
- Improve equity in literacy, health and income
- Reduce violence
- Enhance social stability
- Improve the quality of human capital
- Embrace the opportunities in modern, knowledge-based economies
- Be successful in the continuing experiments in civilisation
- Sustain the biosphere for future populations (Mustard, 2006, p. 60).

In Australia, investment in children is considered vital for national development and prosperity: “national effort to improve child outcomes will in turn contribute to increased social inclusion, human capital and productivity in Australia” (COAG, 2009, p. 4). If children are groomed to be resilient, knowledgeable,
resources, compassionate and determined, then their life outcomes will more likely be positive (Porter, 2016). Conversely,

... children who have a poor start to life are more likely to develop learning, behavioural and emotional problems which may have far-reaching consequences throughout their lives and in turn, the lives of their children. These problems accrue to the whole society in the form of increased social inequality, reduced productivity and high costs associated with entrenched intergeneration disadvantage ... alleviating disadvantage during the early years of life are both effective for improving child outcomes and often yield higher returns on investment than remedial interventions later in life (COAG, 2009, p. 6).

From a national perspective, investment in the early years is certainly beneficial to future economic prosperity. From a child’s perspective, children will be more likely to grow into well-adjusted, happy and satisfied individuals, who aspire to self-actualisation and are supported in this aspiration. The benefits associated with early investment are acknowledged, and this is why the COAG proposed that by 2020 “all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (COAG, 2009, p. 4).

2.4.1 National Quality Framework

To achievable positive life outcomes for the nations children, investment into ECEC settings has become a priority, and Australia introduced the ECEC quality agenda reform (COAG, 2009), with the National Quality Framework at the helm (ACECQA, 2013a). With research informing its decision, the COAG recognised the need to have a national approach to raise quality in ECEC, and committed to make a sizable financial investment into the ECEC sector. The COAG quality reform agenda saw Australia start to bridge the gap between national and international best
practice in ECEC (OECD, 2001), and fortified Australia’s reputation in the ECEC field (Tayler, Ishimine, Cloney, Cleveland & Thorpe, 2013).

The quality ECEC agenda was a powerful drive, and with it came many notable changes within the field. The National Quality Framework is positioned at the top of the ECEC quality improvement hierarchy. As of January 2012, it brought about changes to the field that would aim to raise quality, thereby supporting positive child outcomes.

Research on the importance of high quality ECEC for positive child outcomes has informed the Australian government improvements on both structural and process quality in ECEC (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010). Process quality considers quality educator-child interactions, leadership and pedagogical skills, whereas structural quality referrers to staff qualification, staff-child ratios, and facilities, which are largely controlled by government policies and funding (Ishimine et al., 2010).

Structural quality is considered to enhance process quality, which in turn directly influences overall quality (Ishimine et al., 2010). This can be seen in the Australian ECEC context with the recent introduction of lowered staff-to-child ratios. For example, by lowering these ratios (structural quality), educators are able to spend more one-on-one time with children, resulting in more interactions and stronger relationships (process quality). Figure 2.8 illustrates how structural quality and process quality influence one another to affect child outcomes.
Figure 2.8: Structural and process quality.


Specifically, the NQF aimed to raise ECEC quality through these structural changes:

- The development and implementation of the National Quality Standards (NQS)
- A national quality rating and assessment process
- Streamlined regulatory arrangements
- A national body jointly governed by the Australian government and state and territory governments to oversee the system (ACECQA, 2013a)

From these structural changes, it could be expected that process quality would improve to produce positive child outcomes within ECEC settings.

2.4.1.1 ECEC regulations that support educator-child relationships

The significance of relationships was a driving force in the newly introduced regulations concerning lower child-to-staff ratios and increased qualifications. As research has shown, the more time educators are able to spend engaged with children, the closer the attachment (and therefore the more positive relationship) between educator and child (Anderson, Nagle, Roberts, & Smith, 1981; De Schipper, et al., 2008). The importance of one-on-one time between educator and child was a consideration in the Australian government’s pursuit to improve quality in ECEC (ACECQA, 2013a). A solution to increase the amount of one-on-one time children
receive with their educators was to reduce child- to-staff ratios in the birth to 3 years age group from 1:5 to 1:4, a regulation introduced in January 2012. There have been several studies investigating a correlation between low staff-to-child ratios and quality interactions and relationships (Bornstein, Hahn, Gist & Haynes, 2006; Recchia, 2012), and lower staff to child ratios are suggested to be particularly important for quality ECEC in the birth to 3 year age group (De Schipper, Riksen-Walraven, & Geurts, 2006). While some research has found staff to child ratios to have no influence on quality (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen & Mulder, 2015), a robust amount of research has found that lower child-staff ratios results in higher quality ECEC (for example Barros & Aguiar, 2010; Bornstein et al., 2006; De Schnipper et al., 2006), and therefore lower child to staff ratios are considered a key component in the delivery of quality ECEC (ACECQA, 2013a).

Educator qualifications were also on the ECEC quality agenda, with regulations now requiring both a minimum qualification for educators who work with children (Certificate IV), as well as a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education-qualified educator to be positioned in every ECEC setting, specifically aimed at working with preschool-aged children. Increasing the qualification of ECEC educators was informed by robust research, which has shown that educators with higher qualification show higher quality teaching, therefore enabling children to make better progress (Sylva et al., 2004). As it related to the current study, research has also found that higher levels of educator knowledge and training support educator-child relationships (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford & Howes, 2002; Howes, Whitebook, & Phillipa, 1992; NICHD, 2006). While currently bachelor-trained educators are
positioned only with preschool-aged children, by 2020 a degree-qualified educator will also be required to work with children from birth to 3 years (ACECQA, 2013a).

From a structural quality position, it is evident that the Australian government has made important changes to the ECEC sector that aim to improve quality and child outcomes. Beyond the influence of newly introduced regulations, the NQS was developed in order to support the implementation of the quality ECEC agenda.

2.4.2 National Quality Standards

The NQS sets a quality benchmark for all ECEC settings in Australia, and is governed by an accreditation body (ACECQA). The quality benchmarks set for the ECEC field include:

- Improved educator-to-child ratios
- Greater individual care and attention for children
- Educators with increased skills and qualifications
- Better support for children’s learning and development
- A national register to help parents assess the quality of education and care services in their area (ACECQA, 2013b).

The NQS identifies seven quality areas in which all ECEC settings must meet in order to legally operate within Australia. These seven quality areas are identified in Figure 2.9, and present educator relationships with children as a quality area. This is significant to the current study, as it highlights the importance of positive educator-child relationships in ECEC settings, thereby making research on educator-child relationships meaningful to inform on quality practice.
Quality area number 5, *relationships with children*, stipulates that educators must focus on being responsive and respectful towards all children in ECEC settings. Furthermore, educators are guided to promote children’s sense of security and belonging within the ECEC setting, so that they are able to confidently explore and engage in their ECEC environment. This, in turn, aims to optimise children’s overall learning and development, and produce positive child outcomes (ACECQA, 2013b).

Table 2.2 shows how this is outlined in the NQS through quality area number 5.
Table 2.2: NQS quality area 5 description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard 5.1</th>
<th>Quality area 5 - Relationships with children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.1.1</td>
<td>Interactions with each child are warm and responsive and build trusting relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.1.2</td>
<td>Every child is able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions that support the acquisition of skills for life and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.1.3</td>
<td>Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard 5.2</th>
<th>Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.2.1</td>
<td>Each child is supported to work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.2.2</td>
<td>Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element 5.2.3</td>
<td>The dignity and the rights of every child are maintained at all times.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The nestling of relationships within the five quality areas of the NQS asserts the importance of educator-child relationships in Australian ECEC settings. The Australian NQS are in line with the NAEYC (2009), where relationships are also positioned as Standard 1, stipulating educators must build warm, trusting and responsive relationships with children.

In addition, the COAG national quality reform agenda initiatives for improving child outcomes have seen the introduction of Australia’s first ECEC curriculum document, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009), which was introduced in all Australian ECEC settings as of January 2012 (ACECQA, 2013a). In Australian ECEC settings, curriculum refers to “all interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in the
environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).

2.4.3 Early Years Learning Framework

The Australian EYLF curriculum document provides ECEC settings and educators with information and guidelines to support their implementation of quality practice and programming, likely to result in positive child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). Rather than a prescriptive curriculum, the EYLF is open-ended, enabling educators to have a certain amount of autonomy when using it to inform their practice.

The EYLF introduces a set of principles, practices and learning outcomes for educators to adhere to in ECEC to ensure high quality for the benefit of children. Five principles are identified, based on contemporary theories and research that serve to inform and underpin quality practice. These principles are illustrated in Figure 2.10.

![Figure 2.10: EYLF principles](Adapted from: DEEWR (2009, p. 12-13). Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework. Melbourne: Victoria Curriculum and Assessment Authority.)
Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships are identified as principle number 1, which emphasises the importance of educator-child relationships in the ECEC setting, which was the impetus of the current study. It can therefore be considered that the foundation of these principles is that positive educator-child relationships provide a secure base for children to explore their world and develop connectedness in meaningful ways, which supports children’s overall learning and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).

The eight practices identified by the Australian EYLF are based on philosophy and pedagogy, to promote children’s learning. As illustrated in Figure 2.11, educators’ responsiveness to children is a key practice.

![Diagram of EYLF practices](image)

**Figure 2.11: EYLF practices**


As it pertains to the current study, it is well established that one of the key elements that contribute to positive child relationships in responsiveness (Ainsworth,
1978; Bowlby, 1969; DECS, 2008). The responsibility here is on educators to be appropriately responsive to children’s individual needs, interests and strengths in order to support their wellbeing and learning. Respect, trust and cultural awareness shine through as important elements of responsive practice (DEEWR, 2009).

The aforementioned principles and practices of the EYL serve a critical purpose – to support positive child outcomes. Figure 2.12 illustrates the five learning outcomes stipulated in the EYLF:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident & involved learners
- Children are effective communicators

**Figure 2.12: EYLF practices**


Wellbeing is considered essential for a child to feel a sense of belonging, confidence in being who they are, and contribute to who they are becoming. Smith (2008) describes this as the movement towards children becoming active citizens of the world, who are capable of contributing to their own life trajectory in meaningful ways. Wellbeing in the EYLF encompasses health, happiness, satisfaction and social functioning (DEEWR, 2009). In order to support the development of a strong sense
of wellbeing, the EYLF highlights the importance of educators establishing positive relationships with all children (DEEWR, 2009). In this way, educator-child relationships and child wellbeing share a link. The current studies focus on children’s relationships and wellbeing (together) may contribute to contemporary knowledge and understanding that inform the quality of practice in regional ECEC settings.

Ultimately, the Australian EYLF provides ECEC educators with a strong guide for quality pedagogical practice to ensure all children have the opportunity to develop in a supportive environment, built upon educators’ knowledge of child development. Relationships between educators and children are thoroughly represented in the EYLF, highlighting the importance it holds in children’s lives for their learning and development. For example, learning outcome area one, identity, describes the importance of relationships and strong attachments, critical for developing a positive identity (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF’s intent is to ensure ECEC services operate at high quality standards for the benefit of children’s optimum development, and educator-child relationships are a key component of this (ACECQA, 2013b). This curriculum document is in line with other international early childhood curriculum documents, such as Nurturing Early Learning in Singapore (Singapore Ministry of Education [SMoE], 2013), the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (EYFS) (Department for Children, Schools & Families [DCSF], 2008) and the Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education [NZMoE], 1996). Relationships are therefore represented as a key element to ECEC globally.

Katz (1994) suggest that quality ECEC needs to be considered from five perspectives to provide a holistic understanding: 1) researchers; 2) parents; 3) staff; 4) children; and 5) community/society. Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002) claim that
the researchers’ perspective dominates our understanding of quality in ECEC, and that staff and children’s perspectives are only represented minimally. The current study collected 2 of the 5 outlined perspectives: (1) researcher and 2) staff/educator) to inform of the quality of ECEC in regional Victoria, through investigation of educator-child relationships. In this way, further insights into quality ECEC can be contributed to the field of ECEC through the findings of this study.

The Australian government relies on data being undertaken by large-scale longitudinal studies on Australian children to inform their rigorous assessment of policy interventions for quality improvement in ECEC. Some of these studies include the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection (NECECC), and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). All of these data collections are certainly robust and represent all 4 perspectives stipulated by Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002) to provide key insights that support the Australian government in raising quality educational experiences for young children (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2016). However, they mostly focus on children from preschool to primary school, and so a gap in knowledge exists for children from birth to 3 years and their experiences of ECEC quality. The current study aimed to produce findings that would help bridge that gap.

Furthermore, the aim of the current study is not to investigate every initiative implemented by COAG in the quality form agenda, but rather to focus of one aspect of quality ECEC – educator-child relationships. To do so, factors that are known to influence them were investigated. Significantly, only factors that were visible in the ECEC setting were under the microscope.
2.5 Factors that influence educator-child relationships

Over the years, research has informed us of a plethora of factors that seemingly influence adult-child relationships. Through this research, certain caregiver traits and practices can be considered to either contribute towards positive or negative relationships (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). For example, De Wolff and Van IJzendoorn (1997) present the following characteristics that tend to result in positive adult-child relationships, as illustrated in Table 2.3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>Responding promptly and appropriately to infant’s signals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>Expressing positive affect and affection for the infant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchrony</td>
<td>Structuring smooth, reciprocal interactions with the infant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutuality</td>
<td>Structuring interactions in which mother (adult) and infant attend to the same thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Attending closely to and providing emotional support for children’s activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>Frequently directing actions towards the infant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The list provided in De Wolff and Van IJzendoorn table bears a striking resemblance to the Australian-developed Reflect, Respect, Relate document, which aims to support educators practice in ECEC settings through positive educator-child relationships (amongst other key elements of quality), as shown in Table 2.4 (DECS, 2008). This pertains to the current study, as it was the DECS observational scales that were used to collect data in order to measure educator-child relationships (see section 3.4.1).
### Table 2.4: Factors that influence child relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Children have physical and emotional access to educator and receive reliable and consistent responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>Educators are welcoming and interactions with children are happy, respectful, caring and positive. An active interest is taken in what children are involved and interested in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Verbal Exchange</td>
<td>Educators and children are engaged in sustained conversation. Exclamations, questions and comments are responded to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>Children have access to and experience of caring behaviour from educators. Children are treated fairly and receive support and guidance when overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Additionally, Kostelnik and colleagues (2015) identify five key elements that they consider to influence the educator-child relationship. These are outlined in Figure 2.13:

![Figure 2.13: Elements that influence child relationships](image)

*Figure 2.13: Elements that influence child relationships*


Other factors that have been widely researched are the home life of children, including family composition, socio economic status, parenting styles, culture and child maltreatment (Berk & Meyers, 2016). However, these factors could not be
observed by the researcher of the current study due to the strict time parameters of the project, and therefore have not been included in the literature review. Ultimately, the current study examined only literature concerning factors that are known to influence the educator-child relationship in the ECEC setting. One such factor was trust established between educator and child.

2.5.1 Trust

At the most basic level, trust is considered an important component of one’s personality (Erikson, 1950; Ebert, 2009). It can be considered a fragile, emotional issue which holds influence over all our interactions with others: “Trust is perceived as a kind of essence or ‘je ne sais quoi’. This special essence – highly valued but also illusive – belong to one of the very important intangible assets in relationships” (Ebert, 2009, p. 66). That trust is a key aspect to a positive and functioning relationship is a commonly asserted position amongst researchers and theorists alike (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gazzaniga, Heatherton & Halpern, 2012; Kalat, 2016): trust that a person will respond appropriately to our needs (whether they be physical, emotional, spiritual, financial); trust that a person will be there when we need them; trust that a person will support us in difficult times; trust that a person will not harm us or threaten our safety. Trust relates to many types of relationships we experience as humans, such as paternal, romantic, social and countless other relationships we develop over the course of our life. Within the young child’s microsystem, social and paternal relationships tend to be tightly secured in the child’s immediate environment (parents and sibling; educators and peers; neighbours and other relatives). As trust is the foundation of any good
relationship, it is important to consider its conception, and how this factor plays a role in the educator-child relationship.

Trust is highly regarded as the focal point in early stages of child development (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1950). Children must be able to develop a sense of trust in others in order to feel secure in their world, and this is established through relationships with others (Erikson, 1950). Relationships between children and significant adults need to be nurturing, consistent and highly responsive in order to meet the child’s needs. If a child’s needs are responded to in predictable, consistent and nurturing ways, the child will develop a sense of trust (Erikson, 1950). This enables children to be confident, secure and active members of their environment, which in turn develops important survival skills, developmental milestones, cognitive skills and social competence (Dolby, 2007). This idea complements the attachment perspective, as Bowlby (1969) asserts that if trust is established between the child and attachment figure, a secure attachment is likely to form, and this is needed in order for children to thrive and achieve positive outcomes in life. As previously mentioned, educators are in a position to become a child’s attachment figure (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b; Cugmas, 2007).

Biological psychology and neurobiology examine trust on a scientific level by assessing the release of chemicals from the brain in order to measure how trust is developed and maintained amongst individuals. It is well known within the scientific community that the release of the hormone oxytocin plays a large role in developing trusting, positive relationships (Burkett & Young, 2012; Kalat, 2016; Sheele, Wille, Kendrick, Stoffel-Wagner, Becker, Güntürkun, Maier, & Hurlemann 2013), and is often referred to as the ‘attachment’ or ‘love’ hormone. Oxytocin is secreted when
people are engaged in trust relationships and interactions (Gazzaniga, et al., 2012). For example, oxytocin levels increase in mothers during birth (McCall & Singer, 2012), when romantic couples are intimate (Burkett & Young, 2012) and when members of social groups are interacting (Riem, Van Ijendoorn, Tops, Boksem, Rombouts, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012).

Neurological research claims that the birth to 3 years period sees critical and sensitive periods of development, and that sensing pathways, including touch, have a very significant effect on brain development (Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff, 2006). Bowlby (1973) states that in first year of life, children insist on physical contact with their primary caregivers to form a secure attachment. Parent-child studies have found that in order to develop an attachment bond or relationship, a certain amount of skin-to-skin contact needs to occur during critical periods of development found in the first months of life (Feldman, Keren, Gross-Rozval & Tayano, 2004; Kennel & McGrath, 2005; Klaus & Kennell, 1976). Moreover, robust research on children (Benoit, 2004; Schaffer & Emerson, 1994b) showed evidence that skin to skin contact supports healthy attachment, as did Harlow’s research (1958) with monkeys.

Physical contact between humans needs to be present throughout life to establish and maintain emotional bonds between individuals:

... touch and physical contact initiate a reinforcing cycle and produce increased secretion of oxytocin; this makes us more curious and interested in establishing contact ... a cycle is created that leads to the establishment of an emotional bond between two people (Moberg, 2003, p. 124).

Between educators and children, touch is something that occurs and can be observed in the ECEC setting, and therefore can be investigated as contributing
towards relationships. Barbas (2013) encourages educators to build trusting relationships through positive touch, for example rocking and soothing a crying baby (p. 20). In relation to the current study, it is important to note that when adults and children engage in mutually pleasant touch, in the form of holding hands, a warm embrace or stroke of the cheek, oxytocin is released, which serves to foster an emotional bond between these two and contributes to positive educator-child relationships (Moberg, 2003). It should be noted here that educators need to initiate touch between them and the child, as they have a socially accepted amount of authority over the latter (Wyness, 2012). A gentle touch on the shoulder or pat on the hand can serve to support the development of trust in the educator-child relationship.

When discussing the role of positive physical touch between educators and young children, it is important to note that physical contact in ECEC can sometimes be thwarted by an indistinct line of appropriate and inappropriate practice. For example, Mazur and Pekor (1985) assert that educators must walk a fine line between providing children with nurturing and sensitive physical affection, while showing awareness and respect for children body integrity and autonomy. This position is also evident in the UN rights of the child (1990), which states that children have the right to assert power over their own body. DECS (2011) outline appropriate physical contact practices for educators, which reminds educators to pay attention to young children cues. For example, if a child indicates that they want comfort by outreaching their arms towards an educator, that educator should provide physical comfort; if a child stiffens or shows discomfort at physical contact, the educators must desist. Overall, the importance of physical contact in the establishment of trust
was described by educators in the current study, and is supported by previous literature, however educators must be aware of the appropriate practice boundaries dictated by the Australian government (DECS, 2011) and with respect to the rights of the child (UN, 1990).

While it can be debated whether trust is attained due to the release of oxytocin or vice-versa (that oxytocin is released once trust is established), the fundamental and rarely disputed view is that is plays a role in relationships (Bartels & Zeki, 2003). The significance of this in regards to educator-child relationships is that the release of oxytocin can better equip both parties to respond to one another’s behaviours and social cues, in a way that will promote trust and attachment (Kalat, 2016).

Interestingly, Olff and colleagues (2013) inform that while oxytocin promotes pro-social behaviours when social cues in the environment are positive, the role of oxytocin can elicit anti-social behaviours if social cues in the environment are interpreted as negative. Furthermore, the role of oxytocin in developing trust between two people can have the opposite effect if trust fails to be established early on, or if it has been fractured by a significant breach. In these cases, the release of oxytocin acts as a deterrent, and will cause wariness and distress in the subject when faced with a person they do not trust (Olff et al., 2013). This can result in the attainment of an undesirable attachment classification (anxious/avoidant or anxious/ambivalent), and physical and emotional avoidance or resistance in interactions between individuals. From this perspective, if trust is not established at the very foundation of an educator-child relationship, it becomes extremely difficult to move towards a trusting relationship.
While trust is recognised as a significant component in relationships (Erikson, 1950), it can often be viewed differently amongst people, depending on individual ideas and understanding about what trust is, how it can be developed and consequences arise through the development of trust or mistrust in any given relationship (Ebert, 2009). The focus then becomes on identifying ways in which trust can be built between two people, specifically educators and children. Katz (1994) claims that children need to feel that they are understood, respected and accepted by their educator in order to develop a sense of trust in ECEC. Additional factors put forth by prominent researchers (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b; Rolfe & Link, 2011) and theorists (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1950), and are investigated in the current study include:

- Communication (quality verbal exchanges)
- Positive interactions (meaningful and appropriate)
- Responsiveness (appropriate and nurturing)

It is important to recognise that these factors facilitate a certain amount of interaction and crossover influences. For example, in order for trust to develop using these elements, responsiveness relies on bidirectional communication, which informs interactions, and so on. Figure 2.14 provides a visual representation of these elements interacting to produce trust:
This level of trust paves the way for the establishment of a positive educator-child relationship. The recurrence of *responsiveness* as a main element of building trust between two people is consistently found throughout research and theory, as shown in the literature previously mentioned. In this case, unpacking the idea of responsiveness is a necessary step in gaining a comprehensive understanding of this critical component of the educator-child relationship.

### 2.5.2 Responsiveness

To reiterate, it is suggested that being responsive to children’s cues and needs paves the way for early attachment between educators and children (ACECQA, 2013b; Barbre, 2013; Bowlby, 1982; DECS, 2008; DEEWR, 2009; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Rolfe & Linke, 2011). Educator sensitivity and responsiveness are together considered significant contributors to secure educator-child attachment (Dunst &
Kassow, 2008; Goosens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990), as children are more likely to form secure attachments to caregivers who respond quickly and appropriately to their cues and needs, and who interact with them regularly (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964b; Whitebread, 2012).

It is particularly important for educators to respond to infant cues of crying, smiling, sucking, clinging and following, as these are attachment behaviours (Bowlby, 1969; Office of Child Care [OCC], 2010) that infants employ as a way to form an attachment and have their needs met:

... secure attachments form when the infant’s needs are met sensitively, appropriately and in a timely manner by their caregiving people. When they are hungry, they are fed; when they are sad, they are comforted; when they want to explore, they are supported; and when their feelings get too much for them, they are helped (Rolfe & Linke, 2011, p. 9).

A study conducted by Riem, Bakermans-Kraneburg and Van IJzendoorn (2012) showed that infants crying triggers irritation in caregivers who have established an insecure attachment to the child. Riem and colleagues postulate that negative emotions during exposure to infant crying could explain why caregivers without a secure attachment often reject or respond inconsistently to infants’ attachment behaviours. While attachment behaviours tend to elicit a positive caregiving response by adults (Bowlby, 1969), other behaviours exhibited by young children, such as anger, hostility and aggression, tend to provoke negative responses from adults (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Research has found that often educators do not respond to children’ needs and cues with the intent of building relationships, but rather they respond to negative behaviours of children, and this has negative
implications for the educator-child relationship (Koles, O’Connor & McCartney, 2009).

Children become better adjusted and their emotional wellbeing is promoted when adults respond appropriately to them (Porter, 2016). In order to be a responsive educator, one must respond to children in prompt and appropriate ways (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMond, Hahn & Haynes, 2008) and be physically and emotionally available to children at all times (DECS, 2008). To be physically present could be construed just to mean that educators must be in the same room as children; however, this does not necessarily translate to being physically available to children. Educators must be physically present and available for children to use as a safe base for exploration, to which they can return for comfort and assistance when distressed (Dolby, 2007).

In order to meet children’s emotion needs, educators must be emotionally available, meaning they should be willing to listen to children, be engaged with them throughout the day, show interest in their curiosity and nurture their emotional expressions and needs (Kostelnik et al., 2015). Katz (1994) emphases that educators working with younger children, as in the current study, carry an additional burden, as they must accurately infer children’s needs and desires, as infants and toddlers are less able to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Also, consideration must be given to the child’s unique home life, culture, temperament, mood and situation (DECS, 2008). Perspectives on fostering secure relationships with infants and toddlers were investigated by Ebbeck and Yim (2009), in whose study educators articulated being responsive and emotionally available as a primary way to foster relationships with infants and toddlers. This is significant, as it suggests that educators are aware of the
important role this factor play in developing educator-child relationships, and which should be visible as part of their practice in ECEC. For these reasons, it was investigated in the current study.

2.5.3 Interactions

“All children need a supportive and friendly environment where caring adults interact with them, using positive communication based on respect, reciprocity and warmth” (Banham, Hanson, Higgins & Jarrett, 2000, p. 21). It is known that children learn more in their educational environment when educators are actively engaged and interact with children (Banham et al., 2000; Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta & Jamil, 2013; Swan & Dolby, 2003). However, in addition to learning, positive educator-child interactions also support the establishment and maintenance of positive relationships between them. Therefore, learning how to interact with young children in order to build relationships and form strong attachments is an important consideration for ECEC educators, as “respectful and sensitive interactions with the infant and toddler are fundamental for building positive relationships” (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008, p. 167). These interactions must be positive, caring and respectful (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), as “adult interactions with babies and toddlers provides stimuli that influence how the brain develops and how children respond to new situations and challenges” (DECS, 2008, p. 4). In this way, educator-child relationships can be a source of support that enriches a child’s development, or a source of dysfunction that damages a child’s sense of wellbeing (Schore, 2000).

Children as young as four months have the ability to discriminate among different emotions, such as joy and anger (Hetherington, et al., 1999) and distinguish positive and negative emotions through facial expressions (Berk & Meyers, 2016;
Interestingly, studies have asserted the connection between children’s facial expression and adult responses from either a ‘caregiving’ or ‘social’ stance. For example, infants displaying negative facial expressions (i.e. crying) would elicit a stronger caregiving response from adults (Berry & McArthur, 1985), as in these early months interactions are essential for survival through care. Conversely, in older children, positive facial expressions are found to elicit higher levels of responsiveness from adults (Hildebrandt, 1983), as at this age interactions are based on social functions. Therefore, the idea that facial expressions firstly acts to elicit caregiver’s responses, with the intent of facilitating complex social associations, is gaining traction in the research community (Kringelbach et al., 2016).

In the first years of life, emotional expression between caregivers and children becomes the primary form of communication (Bowlby, 1969). Later, between eight and ten months, infants will expect caregivers to match their emotional face to face communication (Berk & Meyers, 2016). Educators’ who interact willingly and often with children encourage this emotional expression, and this high level of educator-child interaction and involvement has been found to develop quality relationships and secure attachment (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b). Educators who remain detached, and avoid interacting with children, provide children with damaging early experiences that have been found to have negative long-lasting consequences (Fein, 1995). As physical contact and sustained interactions have previously been identified as an important element in the development of trust (see section 2.5.1), positive interactions between children and adults help to establish relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2006), and harsh interactions contribute to poor educator-child relationships (Rudasill, 2011).
One robust piece of evidence supporting the importance of positive interactions in the development of relationships is the heavily repeated ‘still face experiment’, findings of which were presented during the 1975 biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development by Edward Tronick and colleagues. This experiment was undertaken on the assumption that interactions between child and adult will have an enormous impact on attachment relationships. The experiment saw a mother interacting with her infant child in positive, reciprocal and responsive ways for a short period of time, before becoming expressionless and unresponsive to her child. The child would spend several minutes attempting to regain their mother’s attention through typical attachment behaviours (smiling, cooing and employing hand gestures), which the child had learnt over time would ensure interactions between the pair. After several minutes without response or interaction from the mother, the child would seemingly give up on these behaviours, and employ other attachment behaviours (crying); they would become visibly upset and solemn, and eventually position themselves away from their mother. The solemn reaction in children evoked by an un-responsive caregiver demonstrated young children’s ability to modulate their affection and attention towards or away from an attachment figure (Adamson & Frick, 2003), which could have devastating impacts on attachment classification.

In an ECEC arena, the opportunity to maintain quality, long-lasting interactions with individual children can be limited due to the high number of children per educator (De Schnipper et al., 2008; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002). It is suggested that better staff-to-child ratios are needed for quality educator-child interactions (Bornstein et al., 2006). When educators are involved...
with children throughout the day, there are more opportunities for educator-child interactions, positive touch and sensitive responsiveness, and this contributes towards positive educator-child relationships (Howes & Smith, 1995). It is also thought that lower staff-to-child ratios in a teaching environment influence teacher morale, thereby having a positive effect on teaching practices and the development of a more nurturing and supportive environment for children (Ballantine & Spade, 2015).

Another key component to ensure quality interactions are taking place comes down to educators being fully present in the ECEC setting, by making themselves emotionally and physically available to interact with children from birth to 3 years (McMullen & Dixon, 2009). Educators must interact with children regularly, focusing on children’s emotional development (Banham, 2000), in addition to meeting children’s basic needs. In an industry notorious for its high-demand duties, it is an obvious consideration that this may not always be achievable. Distractions such as housekeeping duties and adult-adult interactions/communication can have a big impact on educators’ availability to interact with children. Kostelnik and colleagues (2015) suggest that any task which “diminishes educators’ attentiveness to the children” makes them unavailable, and therefore needs to be avoided (p. 53). This factor was investigated in the current study.

Interactions and involvement have shared a similar foundation in research with children, and so educator involvement will be briefly presented to this discussion. Past research has found that high educator involvement was attributed to higher levels of child exploration, and children whose educators were highly
involved showed more signs of having formed attachment to their educators (Anderson et al., 1981; Howes & Hamilton, 1992a; Howes & Smith, 1995).

Educator training is commonly found to increase the quality of educator-child interactions (Burchinal et al., 2002), and therefore can be considered an influencing factor of these interactions. Educators must know the basic fundamentals when it comes to interacting with children, such as child development, effective communication skills, understanding of child development and behaviour, and knowing when to enter and leave play situations (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

2.5.4 Communication

Children are avid communicators from birth (DEECD, 2009), which is an important part of their relationships with adults, as being capable of communicating effectively with other humans is an essential part of having one’s needs met (Bowlby, 1969). Children from birth to 3 years old start their communication journey by using sounds, gestures, visual and non-verbal cues, and then move on to verbal communication (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Nyland, 2009). All of these communicative methods are employed by young children as a way to establish relationships with significant adults in their world (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; DEECD, 2009). Communication between children from birth to 3 years and educators is considered to foster the educator-child relationship, as it supports positive interactions and responses (McMullen & Dixon, 2009). Furthermore, children’s develop their wellbeing through the ability to express their inner thoughts, feelings and emotions (DEECD, 2009).

A study by Nyland (2004) observed everyday experiences of young children in ECEC settings. Observations were coded, with focus on communication, educators’
routine practice and provision of cultural artefacts. Findings revealed that children employ a sophisticated array of communicative techniques to gain educators attention, however educators often fail to acknowledge or misunderstand these attempts at communication, and rarely respond appropriately. This has implications for children having their needs responded to appropriately, which calls into question whether or not children’s rights are being met (UN, 1990). Nylan (2004) raises questions about educator training in relation to young children, as well as educators’ fundamental grounding of theory to inform practice.

Educators with optimal communication skills are better equipped to foster relationships with young children and this, in part, relies on educators ability to not only recognise the various forms of communication methods children employ, but also a keen ability to respond appropriately to these communicative expressions (Arthur et al., 2015). Therefore, educators must have effective communication skills and strategies that enable them to interact with children in a positive manner to facilitate the educator-child relationship, and ensure that interactions remain respectful and appropriate (Community Child Care Victoria [CCCV], 2011). For example, a communicative strategy that supports communication with toddlers is ‘labelling’ (i.e. names of people, objects and so forth). Some further examples of strategies to nurture positive interactions include:

- Getting down to the child’s level when speaking with them – making eye contact and engaging in conversation
- Making sure facial expressions and body language match one’s words
- Encouraging children to talk and express themselves
- Asking children open-ended questions
- Giving children time to respond, trying not to answer one’s own questions.
• Role-modelling clear and appropriate communication
• Using active and reflective listening techniques
• Showing empathy by ‘stepping into the child’s shoes’ and trying to understand how they feel
• Using children’s names – avoiding terms like “sweetie” or “dear” (CCCV, 2011, p. 10).

Educators also need to have a broad understanding of child development, in order to interact with children in meaningful ways. Having realistic expectations of individual child capabilities and behaviours will ensure that educators’ expectations of children are within the appropriate realm (Porter, 2016), which will result in powerful interactions. It is important that ECEC educators understand the language development of children aged 0 to 3 years, as Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) found that educators’ responsiveness is influenced by the language abilities of young children.

2.5.5 Time

As Goossens and Van IJzendoorn (1990, p. 836) state, “both infants and caregivers need time to adapt to each other and learn how to decode each other’s signals and behaviours”. The notion that ‘relationships take time to develop’ is certainly relevant when looking at educator-child relationships in Australian ECEC settings.

Time can be an abstract concept when considering ECEC settings and children’s engagement within them. Firstly, we must look at time as being ‘time spent’ in the setting; that is, hours per day, and days per week. From this perspective, if a child was to spend six hours per day, five days a week in care, it could influence the relationship with their educator. Research has found this to be
true, and that children who spend more time in ECEC setting each week are more likely to have positive relationships with their educator (Howes, 1988; Goossens & Van Ijzendoorn, 1990). At this juncture, it is important to recognise that time spent in ECEC settings does not necessarily mean more time spent with the educator, as educators must disperse their presence amongst other children, as well as on administrative and housekeeping duties.

We then consider familiarity over time, for example, being in an ECEC setting with the same educator for three months versus three years would suggest a better relationship. It can be confidently asserted that “… it can take a lot of relaxed, deep-time familiarity to understand a baby’s quirks and preferences” (Karen, 2008, p. 114), and infants and adults require time to understand one another on a meaningful level. This sentiment was supported by recent research, wherein educators reported growing closer to children over time, and this sense of closeness was attributed to emotional change, sustained interactions and affection (Recchia, 2012, p.148). This finding was significant, as one of the educators had previously admitted to feeling distant from the child, and frustrated with their behaviours; in other words, educator-child relationships are influenced by time.

A previous study undertaken by Raikes (1993) looked at infant-educator attachment in ECEC, finding that the 91% of children who had spent at least one year with their educator had developed a secure attachment. Conversely, only 67% of children who had spent 6-months - and even fewer of those who had spent the least amount of time with their educator (50%) – had developed a secure attachment. These findings suggest that time is a factor that influences the educator-child relationship, and that over time, educator-child relationships become more defined,
predictable, and able to provide children with a secure base. Raikes highlights that to increase the likelihood that a positive educator-child relationship will develop, the child needs to spend a minimum of nine months with their educators in the setting. This can be difficult to achieve in the current ECEC climate, as high staff turnover is a problem (Howes & Hamilton, 1992a), especially in Australia (Press & Hayes, n.d.).

While the above discussion suggests that ‘more time equals better relationships’, it is also important to consider the reputable research showing that time in ECEC settings tends to increase as children get older (Belsky, 2001); moreover, too much time in ECEC settings tends to have negative outcomes for children (NICHD, 2006), especially if the quality of the ECEC setting is low (Sims, Guilfoyle & Parry, 2006).

To achieve a balance between time in ECEC settings and positive child outcomes, the beneficial factors associated with educator-child relationships are weighed against the negative effects of too much time spent in ECEC and care. In this case, it could be suggested that positive educator-child relationships are required for children who are attending ECEC settings for extended periods in order to negate the latter’s negative effects, as previously asserted by Bronfenbrenner (1979):

... Time with a high-ability teacher would give the infant a sense of trust, predictability and control. Time would contribute to variability of experience from which the teacher would learn what excites, upsets, amuses, or bores the child. From this information he or she would gain the potential to fine-tune interactions, all the while becoming increasingly sensitive to the child (Raikes, p. 312, 1993).
Though ultimately, even after decades of research, it cannot be confirmed that ‘time’ is the reason some children form positive educator-child relationships, it has certainly been found to be a predictor of positive educator-child relationships, and is therefore an important factor to consider.

2.5.6 Routine transition times

Routines in ECEC settings include sleep times, mealtimes, group times and toileting times. Transition times in ECEC settings are defined as movements between activities, for example from group time to lunchtime. Together, routine group times describe children from moving from out routine to the next in the ECEC setting.

The ECEC setting is brimming with numerous routine transition times occurring on a daily basis, particularly in the birth-to-3 rooms. Some examples of daily transitions that involve children’s movement are playtime to lunchtime, lunchtime to toileting time, toileting time to sleep time. Some of these transition times, particularly sleep times, cause stress for both children and staff, and have a negative impact on children’s emotional wellbeing and educator-child relationships due to heightened levels of conflict and environmental stress (Pattinson, Staton, Smith, Sinclair & Thorpe, 2014). Educators’ need to support children through busy transition times, and help them cope so that children feel confident and secure in the process, thereby eliminating the risk of negative outcomes (DEECD, 2009).

A functional purpose of educators is to both organise and appropriately manage transition times effectively (Hamre et al., 2013). Educators should provide children with ample warning when transition times are approaching, in order to support the child in moving positively through each transition with minimal distress and discomfort. For example, children should be given warning that their playtime
will end in order for mealtime times to occur, as appropriate warning time provides children with the opportunity to conclude their play with some level of autonomy (Porter, 2016).

Nyland’s research (2004) found that routines in ECEC can detract from educators ability to effectively respond to and communicate with young children. Nyland also found a lack of individualised routines (including play and sleep) present in the settings, which contradict the ECEC notion that infants and toddlers enjoy flexible routines that occur on demand. Children should be included in making decisions relating to transition times; for example, if children want to continue playing for a period of time before meals, they should have the right to do so. This is one of children’s fundamental rights, as Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child, children should be viewed as capable of making decisions and have their voices heard about matters that affect them (UN, 1990). In the birth to 3 years age group, children are especially reliant on educators to interpret their needs, due to their limited verbal skills. In this case, educators should be in a position to appropriately determine what children want and need, and maintain a flexible ECEC environment that takes children’s needs and wants into consideration.

Educators can best support children through routine transition times through the suggested approaches and processes:

- Respectful, trusting and supportive relationships are maintained among all those working with children and their families
- Information about the child is well understood, shared and valued
- Children have the opportunity to have their say about what is important to them
- Processes are adapted in response to the local communities
- Children and families who require additional support are identified early, and support is planned and delivered through a collaborative approach (DEECD, 2009, p. 33).

As well as preparing children to move seamlessly through routine transition times, educators must ensure that they remain emotionally and physically available to children during these busy periods (Kostelnik et al., 2015). Moving through transition times can cause educators to become distracted, and interactions can be interrupted, as well as responsiveness being less prompt. Therefore transition times in the ECEC setting have the potential to fracture or block educator-child-relationships.

### 2.5.7 Educator-parent relationships

From an ecological systems perspective, parents and educators need to have a strong relationship in order to provide synergy within children’s micro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This symbiotic relationship has been found to influence the type of relationships found between the child and their educator. Collaborative parent-educator partnerships have long been considered as resulting in positive child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009; OCC, 2010; Porter, 2016; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). They enable transmission of vital information that can assist educators to respond to children in appropriate and significant ways. Parents have a depth of understanding regarding their child that needs to be sought by educators in order to both understand the individual child and develop appropriate learning environment and experiences (Rouse, 2012b).

In order to understand how to appropriately engage with and respond to individual children’s needs, educators must ensure they are making every effort to
establish a positive educator-parent partnership. Key knowledge educators need to acquire revolves around cultural practices, disciplinary practices, behavioural and educational expectations, family interests and even SES. As seen in ecological systems theory, these all work together within the child’s micro system to influence development, behaviour and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

O’Connor (2012) examined data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, which included 1364 children from birth to the sixth grade. O’Connor found that children whose parents had more contact with their child’s educational settings, and who were found to have more positive interactions with educators, had higher quality relationships with the latter. This suggests that when parents are actively and positively engaged with the educational setting and its educators, children are more likely to experience positive educator-child relationships.

The connection between parents and educators can also be considered from an outcome perspective – children’s school success. Pianta and associates (1997) conducted a study that looked at mother-child relationships and educator-child relationships, to determine how they impacted on children’s early school outcomes. Results of this study demonstrated that mother-child relationships were a stronger determinant of child school outcomes than teacher-child relationships. Pianta and colleagues summarised two key points from this project for ECEC educators to consider in their practice: 1) educators need to be aware of ways in which children seek emotional contact to meet their relationship needs, as these cues will vary depending on the child; and 2) educators need to understand the mother-child relationship, including the mothers caregiving practices, to gain a more complete
understanding of the child. One such element of parenting that could be learned by educators, based on Pianta and colleagues (1997), is learning what parenting styles children are exposed to. Parenting styles tend to accommodate the majority of the aforementioned variables of home life. Parenting styles were identified by Baumrind in 1967 as having significant impacts on child development and later life outcomes, and were considered to fall within the following domains: 1) authoritarian; 2) authoritative; and 3) permissive. A fourth parenting style, 4) neglectful, was later introduced by Maccoby and Martin (1983). The nature, characteristics and life outcomes of each of these parenting styles are outlined in Table 2.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting Style</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Behaviours</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>High demanding, low responsive</td>
<td>Strict and harsh parents</td>
<td>Produces anti-social adults who lack independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative</td>
<td>High demanding, Highly responsive</td>
<td>Fair, involved and responsive parenting</td>
<td>Produces independent and mature adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permissive</td>
<td>Low demanding, high responsive</td>
<td>Overindulging children</td>
<td>Produces impulsive, risk-taking adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglectful</td>
<td>Low demanding, low responsive</td>
<td>Detached parenting – only provides basic needs</td>
<td>Produce adults who are prone to anti-social behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Children are said to have the best outcomes when they receive authoritative parenting styles (Banham et al., 2000; Baumrind, 1967; Chong & Chan, 2015). The significance of understanding the child’s received parenting style is that educators can adjust their responses and approaches in order to support, or mitigate, the effects of these styles. When a positive parenting style is supported, the child receives consistent guidance, responses and nurturing in both the home and ECEC environment. Harsh parenting and discipline is harmful to children’s emotional
wellbeing (Evans, 2004). When the parenting style is mitigated, educators can aim to provide support and bridge a gap (for lack of a better term) in order to meet the needs of the child.

From a regional perspective, the partnerships that educators hold with families can be significantly different than their metropolitan counterparts. Regional areas of Australia are smaller in size, and therefore the likelihood of educators having a pre-existing relationship with parents is a real possibility. This can act as a protective factor or a barrier towards educator-child relationships, depending on the nature of this already established relationship.

2.5.8 Educator characteristics

It has been put forth that educators’ motivation to teach is due to a ‘love of children’ (Riley, 2011), a passion seemingly required to engage in such meaningful work. At the most basic level, the quality of educator-child relationships is contingent on the individual skills and characteristics of educators (Koles et al., 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). With all humans shaped by unique relationships and experiences over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is inevitable and expected that educators will contribute their own set of distinctive characteristics to their relationship with children. Of particular relevance to the current study, educators’ knowledge and training, personality, and caregiving traits are examined through the literature.

2.5.8.1 Knowledge and training

While previous studies have found no indication that educators years of experience in the field results in quality practice (Honig & Hirallal, 1998; Howes & Hamilton, 1992a), one factor that is considered to improve the basis of educator-child relationships is educator training (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Howes et al., 1992;
Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Educator-child relationships are largely dependent on the educators’ ability to understand and foster this relationship (Riley, 2011):

“Perceptive, responsive practitioners recognise that a powerful way to connect with a client is to recognise his or her own unique qualities” (McClowry, Rodriguez & Koslowitz, 2008, p. 1). It is therefore vital that educators have an understanding of attachment theory in order to promote healthy attachments and relationships between educators and children in ECEC, particularly in the birth to 3 years age group (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008; Howes et al., 1992; Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

A concern with this notion is that educators may not have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively work with 0- to 3-year-olds (Bagdi & Vacca, 2006; Mann & Carney, 2008), making it difficult to effectively establish a foundation for relationships to develop. Barros and Aguiar (2010) draw on their study of quality ECEC programs for toddlers by concluding that higher education and training is a necessary pathway to improve quality ECEC for infants and toddlers. Barros and Aguiar express concern that educators’ training and education programs are heavily focused on preschool aged children, and therefore educators working in the ECEC field may have limited knowledge of education and care practices specifically suited for the birth to 3 year age group.

Knowledge and training of educators is of particular concern in regional areas of Australia. Roberts (2005) highlights that regional areas of Australia struggle to attract and retain quality educators. The consequence of this is that many educators working in regional areas are inexperienced, which can impact on their ability to develop and maintain positive educator-child relationships. However, when educators have support and resources, they can cope better with the challenges
associated with forming educator-child relationships (Sroufe, 1985). In this instance, training and upgrading qualifications can have a positive impact on educator-child relationships (NICHD, 2006).

Furthering this thought, research has also found that educators who are highly trained are better able to have quality interactions with children (Burchinal et al., 2002). When educators know how to develop and maintain relationships, as well as understand the importance of these relationships on children’s overall wellbeing and development, their interactions are more meaningful and translate into positive educator-child relationships (Koles et al., 2009). In some cases, however, it does not seem to make a significant difference, and educator training is considered as having only a modest influence (Pianta et al., 2005). This may suggest that the type of training is relevant to the quality of educators’ relationships with children, and also that, again, it comes down to personal qualities and abilities of individual educators. Conclusion from a study by Jerome, Hamre and Pianta (2008) were that educators should be provided with adequate training that supports their ability to build positive educator-child relationships in educational settings.

2.5.8.2 **Personality**

An additional consideration is the personality of educators. Personality and temperament are sometimes viewed as the same, with ‘temperament’ referring more to the early years, and ‘personality’ to later years of life (McClowry, Rodriguez & Koslowitz, 2008). For the purpose of this literature review, they will be discussed accordingly – educators’ personality and children’s temperament – with the intention to deconstruct individual facets of each.
Personality is often thought of as the “psychological qualities that contribute to an individuals enduring and distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving” (Cervone & Pervin, 2013, p. 8). The meaning behind this is that there are differences amongst individuals in regards to our mental life, emotional experiences and social behaviours. In some spaces, simplistic categories can be offered to define someone’s personality, for example ‘introvert’ or ‘extrovert’. However, these groupings tend to provide only a small insight into one’s personality.

Personality scientists tend to reject the past belief that people are born as blank slates (Locke), and instead consider genetic and environmental factors as contributing towards our personality. Environmental factors such as social class, culture, peers and family are considered the most influential, while the most important genetic ones are evolution, psychological mechanisms, biologically ingrained emotional responses, and behavioural traits (seen in temperament) (Cervone & Pervin, 2013).

Educators unique personality traits are exposed in their practice. Previous research has studied the influence of educator personality on teaching practice, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (1985) to determine which personality traits result in quality teaching (Fisher & Kent, 1998; Rushton, Morgan., & Richard, 2007). These studies have found that educators classed as extraverted were considered to be high quality educators (Fisher & Kent, 1998; Rushton, Morgan., & Richard, 2007). It has been suggested that educators who are classified as extraverted demonstrates personality traits such as enthusiasm, energy, spontaneity and curiosity, which promote learning and engagement. Furthermore, extraverted educators are said to be well suited to work with all age groups (Colker, 2008). Fisher
and Kent (1998) are careful to point out that while an extraverted personality may result in high quality teaching practice, personality alone cannot predict quality teaching.

2.5.8.3 Educators’ mental wellbeing

Educators working in ECEC settings carry enormous responsibility to nurture and support the development and outcomes of young children in Australia (ACECQA, 2013b). ECEC practice is highly demanding, requiring intense physical, emotional and mental commitment (DEEWR, 2009). Due to the arduous nature of this role, many educators experience psychological stress, due to being overworked and overcommitted to their role as ECEC educator (Corr et al., 2015). Educator stress has also been found to influence the educator-child relationship (Yoon, 2002), and when educators create a negative emotionally climate in ECEC setting, children experience stress (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b). From a biochemistry point of view, stress is an over-release of cortisol (Sims et al., 2006), which increases adrenalin levels and puts the brain in a state of ‘freeze’, fight or flight (Australian Childhood Foundation [ACF], 2010). This results in behaviours that are considered erratic, distracted, superficial and less sensitive to the needs of children.

The way an adult treats and responds to a child stems from their own childhood experiences (Bowlby, 1982). Nyland (2004) highlights that educators’ unique history, life experiences and personal theories about young children will influence relationships that are developed in the ECEC setting. This is problematic, as educators’ vast and varied childhood experiences, which have shaped them as human beings, may influence, negatively or positively, their ability to appropriately interact with and respond to children (OCC, 2010). For example, educators who felt
unloved, rejected or were abused as children are at risk of becoming insensitive caregivers (Briggs, 2012; Shaffer & Kipp, 2014) and may exhibit negative care practices, including the withholding of affection, neglect and abuse (Madigan, Moran & Pederson, 2006).

Educators’ mental wellbeing becomes a pertinent consideration when it comes to educator-child relationships. Depression in educators has been found to have a negative influence on their relationship with children (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Kaplan, Dungan & Zinser, 2004). This is due to the fact that educators with signs of depression tend to be less responsive and sensitive, and sometimes more withdrawn (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Due to these behaviours, they often fail to establish a supportive, satisfying and reciprocal relationship with young children (Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). Moreover, educators with depression report higher levels of conflict with children in preschool settings (Hamre, Pianta, Downer & Mashburn, 2007).

Educators need to be self-reflective when it comes to their relationships with children (Howes & Hamilton, 1993), specifically about their own childhood attachment styles, so that they do not inadvertently repeat negative care patterns (OCC, 2010). When educators are vulnerable to stress or emotional and psychological issues that may interfere with their ability to effectively relate to children, they should be supported through their organisation and be provided with strategies that can assist them from a socio-emotional point of view (ARACY, 2010). Strategies that effectively support educator and child social-emotional wellbeing can support interactions and relationships foster positive relationships (Child Safety Commissioner [CSC], 2007).
2.5.9 Child characteristics

A robust body of literature informs us that child characteristics play a significant role in the development of educator-child relationships. These include temperament (Sroufe, 1985; Chess & Thomas, 2012), gender (Ahnert & Pinquart, 2006) and behaviour (Howes & Hamilton, 2003; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002) and child attractiveness. These child characteristics were investigated in the current study for their influence on educator-child relationships, and therefore are presented in the literature review.

2.5.9.1 Temperament

One child characteristic in particular that is said to influence educator-child relationships is temperament (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008; Mann & Carney, 2008; OCC, 2010; Owen, Klausli, Mata-Otero, & Caughy, 2008). Sroufe (1985) suggests that temperament should be considered an important component in educator-child relationships, as “experience and temperament add together to determine attachment status” (p. 9). Temperament can be considered the infant equivalent of personality (Parsons et al., 2014) or the foundation of personality, and can be seen from birth (Nixon & Gould, 2008). The concept of temperament can be defined as

... behavioural propensities that were already evident in infancy and that were a reflection of the constitutional makeup of the individual child... temperamental characteristics are manifest very early in life, are strongly heritable, and are stable over time (Rutter, 1994, p. 24).

Contributing to the above definition of temperament is the conceptualisation of temperament as a two-system construct:

... one system is a biologically based reaction to stimuli in the environment (reactivity), and the other system is the regulatory function that operates
upon reactivity (regulation) ... when considering relationships, the reactive system is the tendency to approach or withdraw from the unfamiliar (i.e., shyness), and the regulatory system is engaged to cope with this natural tendency (i.e., effortful control) (Rudasill & Rim-Kaufman, 2009, p. 109)

In brief, it is understood that temperament is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, and that together they determine how children will behave and react towards people in any given setting. Children’s temperament, and the behaviours and traits associated with that temperament, contribute towards the bidirectional relationships held with adults.

In the mid 1900’s, Chess and Thomas undertook groundbreaking research that revealed the significance of temperament on children’s development and relationships. They regarded temperament as having an influence on adult-child relationships through interactions that influenced one another’s behaviour (Chess & Thomas, 2012). Their research indicated, for the first time, that children were not merely passive entities absorbing experiences, but were indeed contributing to their own development (McCloyry et al., 2008). Chess and Thomas (2012) developed a model, illustrated in Figure 2.15, which identified three types of temperament:

- **Easy**
  - adjusts easily to new situations, quickly establishes routines, is generally cheerful and easy to calm

- **Difficult**
  - slow to adjust to new experiences, likely to react negatively and intensely to them

- **Slow-to-warm-up**
  - somewhat difficult at first but becomes easier over time

*Figure 2.15: Temperament types*

It is important to note that, despite the seemingly obvious hierarchy, there is no ideal temperament for a child to possess in order to foster a positive adult-child relationship (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012), since “the advantages or disadvantages of temperamental characteristics vary depending on the context” (Parsons et al., p. 258, 2014). The temperament that is considered preferable in regards to forming attachments or relationships will vary depending on the temperament, or personality, of the individual adult. Regardless of which style is preferable, temperament as a factor has been found to hold some influence over the educator-child relationship (Churchill, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005).

One of the most significant considerations on the significance of a child’s temperament is that it can strongly influence the way in which adults respond to children’s cues and behaviours (Sturm, 2004). It has been found that educator-child relationships in ECEC may have a larger impact on children with difficult temperaments (Vermeer & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008). A study undertaken by De Schipper, Tavecchio and Van IJzendoorn (2008) observed the attachment relationships of 48 children with their caregivers in 41 ECEC centres. They aimed to discover if positive caregiving was associated with secure attachment, and how this was impacted by children’s temperament. The results showed child temperament was associated with positive caregiving quality, suggesting that children with a difficult temperament experience a lower quality of caregiving, and vice versa. Sroufe’s research (1985) supports this finding, in that a child with a difficult temperament may contribute to an educator being nonresponsive to his or her needs and demands. This child-caregiver mismatch can ultimately impact on the development of educator-child relationships.
Educator-child mismatch was a consideration in the development of the ‘goodness of fit’ model proposed by Chess and Thomas (2012). Its foundation lies upon the consideration of both adult and child temperament, and, in the ECEC arena, it promotes matching a child’s temperament with their educator’s in order to encourage more adaptive functioning and effective interactions, thereby assisting the formation of positive relationships. The foundation of this approach relies on the educators understanding individual children’s temperament and needs, and their ability to adjust their teaching and interactions with each child accordingly (Sturm, 2004):

... if there is a match between the an individual’s temperament and the environment, optimal development can be achieved. Conversely, poorness of fit leads to maladaptive functioning (McClowry, Rodriguez & Koslowitz, 2008, p. 1).

The research on the influence of temperament on the development of educator-child relationships and attachment has its limitations, and so more research is needed (De Schipper, et al., 2008; Sroufe, 1985). The current study did not aim to assess children’s temperament, and measure that against levels of relationships; rather, the current study examined its perceived relevance.

2.5.9.2 Gender (child)

In the context of childhood and society (Wyness, 2012), it is important to consider the implications of gender as a contributing factor to the development of educator-child relationships. Children are considered capable of identifying their own gender from 18-months onwards (Stennes Burch, Sen & Bauer, 2005), however gender specific behaviours and stereotypes are considered to be more predominant the preschool years (Giles & Heyman, 2005).
In previous studies, educators have reported that they consider gender to be an influencing factor in their relationship with children (Howes, Phillipsen & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Hughes, Cavel & Willson, 2001; Koles et al., 2009). Some studies have found that more female children form secure attachments to their ECEC educator than male children (Howes, 2000a; Howes & Hamilton, 1993). This was further supported in a meta-analysis conducted by Ahnert, Pinquart and Lamb (2006), which examined 40 research studies spanning from 1977 to 2003 and involving 2,867 children with a mean age of 29.6 months (SD = 8.6). Findings from this meta-analysis revealed that overall, females had more secure attachments with their caregivers than males (Ahnert et al., 2006).

Male children are often found to have higher levels of conflict in their educator-child relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), due to undesirable behavioural traits they exhibit and the educators’ responses to said behaviours (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). For example, educators consider male children to be less compliant to their demands, which results in higher levels of conflict (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). Also, research has found that educators’ perception of their conflict with males is due to the need for educators’ to interact and intervene more with them, in order to correct or redirect undesirable behaviours (Rudasill, 2011). Additionally, studies have found that undesirable male behavioural traits tend to be more confrontational, including rough play and physical aggression (Giles & Heyman, 2005).

A study by Jerome, Hamre and Pianta (2008) examined teacher reports of closeness and conflict with 878 children from kindergarten to grade 6, which found that educators report more conflict with male children and that these relationships
continue to decline over time. Jerome and colleagues concluded that children do not enter educational areas with equal chances of developing positive educator-child relationships, based on unchangeable factors such as gender, meaning that educators need to have the ability to overcome any conflict or barriers preventing a positive educator-child relationship from forming.

The current study was able to investigate gender as a factor that may influence relationships. It is important to note here that the previous studies have all focused on preschool- and school-aged children, whereas the current study focused solely on children from birth to 3 years, thus investigating gender through a different lens.

2.5.9.3  **Behaviour**

Human behaviours are motivated by need (Maslow, 1943), and societal practices compel humans to behave in certain ways to meet those needs (Rogoff, 2003). In the very early years of development, children are exposed to models of behaviour by significant adults found within their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which includes educators in ECEC settings. Moreover, educators’ responses to children’s behaviour build upon children’s pre-established inner working model, which informs children’s expectations of adult responses to various behaviours (Bowlby, 1969). Recent societal perspectives of early childhood in Australia, motivated by children’s rights (UN, 1990), promote practise that supports children to become internally motivated to be independent and autonomous, thereby ensuring a generation encompassing empathy and civility. In order to promote internal motivation for moral behaviour in children, educators must foster children’s development of autonomy and resilience (Porter, 2016). Porter (2016) suggests a
A guidance approach to managing children’s behaviour is ideal for meeting children’s needs and shaping their future. A guidance approach model promotes understanding children’s emotional needs through analysis of external and internal behaviours. Children are treated with respect, and their behaviour is guided through role modelling and conversation, and above all else, the educator-child relationship is central to the guidance approach. Educators who adopt a guidance approach to behaviour management in the ECEC setting respond consistently and fairly to children’s behaviour, allow children to have a voice when creating appropriate boundaries in the setting, use authentic feedback to support children’s understanding and emotional regulation, and show respect for children’s emotional needs (Porter, 2016). When a guidance approach to behaviour management is presentment in the ECEC setting, children are empowered to become autonomous and resilient adults. A guidance approach to managing children’s behaviour is congruent with an authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1967), in that reasonable expectations and boundaries are put in place to provide security and an understanding of societal expectations of behaviour. Also, the guidance approach denotes a high level of responsiveness to children’s behaviours, promoting extended and thoughtful discourse between educator and child, where mutual understandings can be achieved and children can develop a sense of autonomy and belonging.

In opposition to a guidance approach, a controlling approach to managing children’s behaviour is positioned. A controlling approach to managing children’s behaviour in ECEC settings denotes a level of power to the educator, which leaves the child in a powerless position and threatens the development of autonomy (Porter, 2016). Sharing ties with an authoritarian parenting style (Baumrind, 1967), a
controlling approach relies on dominance and correction of behaviour, where the educator feels compelled to impose strict and harsh rules and instructions on children. When children behave in ways that oppose the set rules, educators resort to punishments or rewards to control children’s behaviour. In ECEC settings, punishments include time outs (where children are isolated from the group), taking away toys, and force-feeding or deprivation of food (DEECD, 2010). Rewards are often in the form of rewards charts where good behaviour is rewarded in some tangible way, desirable food or toys. These practices are considered to have a desired effect on children’s behaviour in the moment, however children are not given the responsiveness and guidance by adults required for them to generate their own understandings and abilities to regulate their emotions, and their behaviour is not internally, but rather externally motivated (i.e., to avoid punishment or to gain rewards). Furthermore, when educators adopt a controlling approach to children’s behaviour it threatens the educator-child relationships, as children see the educator as a power figure that imposes punishments, rather than a supportive figure that promotes their own sense of morality and autonomy in a nurturing manner (Porter, 2016). Ultimately, the approach educators take to supporting children’s behaviour not only presents children with a model of behaviour, but also serves to inform children’s understanding of emotions and complex societal issues of acceptable behaviours. A guidance approach to managing children’s behaviour is the preferable approach in ECEC settings (DEECD, 2010; Porter, 2016).

The varied nature of behavioural traits exhibited by children elicits different responses in educators along the positive and negative spectrum, and therefore tend to be a predictor of educator-child relationships. As well as the behaviour influencing
relationships, the educator-child relationship itself has been found to be a predictor of child behaviour (Hughes, 2012), denoting a bi-directional pattern. Research has consistently found that children who exhibit negative external behaviours, including hostility, aggression and hyperactivity, experience higher levels of educator-child conflict and are more likely to experience poor educator-child relationship (Baker, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hamre et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2000; Koles et al., 2009; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). Also, children who exhibit negative internalised behaviours, including social withdrawal and shyness, tend to receive less affection from caregivers (Zara-Nehad et al., 2014), thereby having a negative impact on educator-child relationships.

A recent study by Thijs and Koomen (2009) examined teacher reports of educator-child relationships in ECEC. Findings from the study found that educators reported less closeness and higher levels of conflict with children exhibiting hyperactive behaviour, which thus appears to influence the quality of the educator-child relationship. These findings have also been supported by past research, which shows that educators have poorer relationships with children who exhibit undesirable external behaviours, such as aggression, hyperactivity and anti-social behaviours (Baker, 2008; Howes et al., 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002).

Thijs and Koomen (2009) also revealed that educators reported less close relationships when the child exhibited undesirable internal behaviours, such as inhibition and shyness. These findings have been supported by other research, which described negative internalised behaviours, including sadness and withdrawal, as predictors of poor educator-child relationships (Arbeau, Coplan & Weeks, 2010;
Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Ultimately, educators are mostly found to develop positive relationships with children who exhibit average behaviours and pro-sociability (Nurmi, 2012; Thijs & Koomen, 2009).

Jerome, Hamre and Pianta’s (2008) suggest that educators’ perceptions of educator-child relationships quality are that children with difficult behaviours are more difficult to form positive relationships with. Children behaving in ways educators deem ‘inappropriate’ can result in educators avoiding or not responding appropriately to the child. Educators’ knowledge and understanding of how to effectively guide children’s behaviour will have an impact on how behavioural issues influence the educator-child relationships (Barbre, 2013; Porter, 2016). Educators “who quickly recognise each behavioural state and learn the infants’ typical pattern (of behaviour) are able to select and time their response to best meet the child’s need” (Kostelnik, et al., 2015, p. 33).

It is particularly important to appropriately support children’s behaviour when they are distressed, which is typically a time when they will exhibit attachment behaviours (Bowlby, 1969). If a child requires comfort after a distressing situation, educators must interact with that child using appropriate responsiveness, which sees educators build upon caring and nurturing interactions that serve to comfort and support the child. This level of responsiveness will in turn support children to develop their behavioural regulation (Hamre et al., 2013), thereby reducing educator-child behavioural conflicts.

The behavioural characteristics of the child are only part of the picture: as mentioned previously, educators’ own behavioural characteristics also come in to play. In this case, the bidirectional element of the educator-child relationship can
again be seen (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Chess and Thomas (2012) reiterate this, and assert that each stakeholder can influence the way the other behaves. In this way, educators’ ability to appropriate respond to and guide children’s behaviour becomes a key factor (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Consideration must be given to how educators and children work together; focus on the compatibility of children with their environment, and their educator, should be highly regarded (Churchill, 2003; Chess & Thomas, 2012). Ideally, in accordance with the goodness of fit model, every effort should be made to place children with educators whose behavioural and personal traits and temperament are in line with the child’s. In this way, educators who have similar characteristic will support and respond to the child more appropriately, and optimal outcomes for children can be achieved through relationships and learning.

2.5.9.4 *Vulnerability*

While positive educator-child relationships are of the utmost importance to vulnerable children, vulnerability can sometimes provide a barrier to establishing these relationships. Children are often considered vulnerable purely on the basis of being a child: the birth to 3 years age group in particular are broadly defined as vulnerable, as they heavily rely on adults to meet their physical and emotional needs (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The AEDC (2015) defines children as vulnerable when they are not meeting developmental domain (for instance, physical and social development). Of most concern, however, are those children who are defined as vulnerable due to being raised in an environment where primary carers cannot (or do not) support their physical and emotional wellbeing (DEECD, 2014). These vulnerable children can experience various forms of maltreatment, a result from
which can have significant short and long term impacts on their development and wellbeing (Briggs, 2012). These children require specialised teaching strategies to support their development and wellbeing (ACF, 2010; CSC, 2007), and research has found that strong educator-child relationships act as a protective factor for this type of vulnerable child (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

In addition to the aforementioned descriptions of vulnerability, various other attributes and characteristics have been found to put children at risk of developing poor educator-child relationships. For example, a study by Jerome, Hamre and Pianta (2008) that examined teacher perception of educator-child relationships quality revealed a myriad of factors that put children at risk of forming poor educator-child relationships. Factors including ethnicity, male children, children with more out of home care attendance, lower academic ability and greater behavioural problems were found to have greater conflict with their educators, and all resulted in lower levels of closeness and higher levels of conflicts with educators. Jerome and colleagues highlight the concern these findings pose for young children, given that educator-child relationships are known to have lasting impacts on children’s social, emotional and developmental outcomes. Jerome and colleagues (2008) concluded their paper by suggesting that it is of vital important to place children at risk of poor relationships (based on the aforementioned factors derived from their study) with educators who are both able and invested in providing children with positive, nurturing relationships. In this way, vulnerable children will be better positioned to form positive educator-child relationships, as these relationships offer the most benefits to vulnerable children (Egeland & Hiester, 1995). It is important to note that this study was conducted with children preschool to grade 6, however these findings
provide insights into the trajectory of educator-child relationships from birth, and so inform best practice in the early years to support positive educator-child relationships in later years.

2.6 Summary of Chapter 2

This literature review has presented contemporary understandings of issues surrounding educator-child relationships and child wellbeing, based on past and current literature, and described the theoretical perspectives adopted to guide the current study.

Areas of focus in the literature review examined the definition of educator-child relationships adopted in the current study. Investigating educator-child relationships from an attachment and ecological perspective was discussed, as well as a number of factors that have been found to influence educator-child relationships. Children’s wellbeing was also defined and discussed for its importance on positive life outcomes. The interplay between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing was also presented.

Throughout this literature review, two key research gaps were identified, including: 1) limited research on children from birth to 3 years; and 2) little research examining wellbeing as an outcome of educator-child-relationships. The current study aimed to provide new knowledge that would inform these gaps in knowledge as they relate to the field of ECEC. Links between the research presented in Chapter 2 and the findings of the current study will be compared and contrasted in Chapter 4.
3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years old in a regional context. This research was undertaken in five Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, with 92 children and 10 educator participants. Specifically, the current study aimed to answer four research questions:

1) What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?
2) What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?
3) What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?
4) What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

3.2 Conceptual framework

The construction of the conceptual framework aimed to identify the key factors and concepts investigated in this research project, and provides a visual representation of the relationship between these factors (Ravitch & Riggan, 2011), as seen in Figure 3.1.
The conceptual framework of this study can be seen as a working system. Specifically, the conceptual framework provides structure for the research, and guides the study undertaken in a *regional context* to investigate *relationships* between *educators* and *children from birth to 3 years*. The conceptual framework also guides the investigation of the *wellbeing* of *children from birth to 3 years*, and illustrates the interconnection between quality ECEC, educator-child relationships, and child wellbeing.

Figure 3.1 situates high quality ECEC as an overarching presence in this research. High quality ECEC has been explored in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 from a
structural and process standpoint, with particular focus on the Australian ECEC quality agenda (COAG, 2009). High quality ECEC is positioned in the conceptual framework as the foundation of this study, as well as the desired product of the research, as answers to the four research questions aim to provide new knowledge and recommendations that could influence ECEC quality in regional Victoria, Australia.

Figure 3.1 positions the regional context of this research directly below high quality ECEC, and above relationships, as the regional context requires a specific lens that enables the researcher to consider the unique and complex nature of ECEC experiences within these geographical spaces. The experiences and outcomes for children growing up in regional areas of Victoria were described in the introduction as being vastly different to metropolitan, including (but not limited to) higher risks of child developmental vulnerability and poor educational outcomes (AEDC, 2015). The conceptual framework positioned the regional location within its structure as a way to ensure a regional perspective was considered throughout this study as a key focal point, as a means to unearth specific findings that could provide contextually relevant knowledge to ECEC in regional areas of Victoria.

Relationships are the focal point of this study. The conceptual framework (see Figure 3.1) positions relationships as stemming from a regional context, and affecting educators and children from birth to 3 years. The theoretical perspectives, literature and research design of the current study revolve around the phenomenon of relationships. Relationships are considered in this study from an attachment and ecological systems theory perspective, related to children’s relationships with their educator. Relationship have been examined scrupulously in the literature review
in order to assert the significance and importance they have on children’s development and wellbeing in the constructs of ECEC settings. In particular, educator-child relationships in ECEC are considered bi-directional, which is made visible in the conceptual framework.

As seen in Figure 3.1, educators share a space in this conceptual framework with children for their role in the educator-child relationship. As mentioned previously, educator-child relationships are considered bidirectional, meaning that educators are contributing to the level of relationships they have with the children in their setting, and vice versa. Observing educators’ practice and gathering their perspectives on the research issue aimed to support the developing understandings of educator-child relationships through meticulous data collection and analysis procedures. Educators are positioned as a rich source of data when investigating factors that influence levels of educator-child relationships.

Figure 3.1 illustrates how children from birth to 3 years hold a meaningful position in the conceptual framework, alongside educators, as they are the focus of the study. In order to understand and answer the four research questions, children’s relationships with their educators and their levels of wellbeing needed to be prevalent in the conceptual framework. Educator-child relationship levels and child wellbeing levels would serve to provide new knowledge to inform of the quality of ECEC in regional Victoria.

3.3 Theoretical framework

The assumption of the conceptual framework (see Figure 3.1) is that all key factors identified are being influenced by one another in an intricate, bi-directional
relationship. The theories of relationships that inform the current study, being attachment theory and ecological systems theory, influence this conceptual framework, as they provide the lens through which to explore the research issue.

3.3.1 Pragmatist paradigm

Paradigms can be considered “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by any given community” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175). Research paradigms tend to be grouped amongst methodological communities – quantitative and qualitative. While quantitative and qualitative paradigms are unique in their worldview, they each offer valuable insights into research (Creswell, 2014). Cooper and White (2012) identify some of the characteristics embedded within each paradigm (see Figure 3.2):

![Figure 3.2: Paradigms and approaches to research](Source: Cooper, K., & White, R. E. (2012, p. 18). Qualitative research in the post modern era: Contexts of qualitative research. Canada: Springer.)
Quantitative research aims to examine relationships amongst variables through measurement, in order to provide objective insight the research issue (Creswell, 2014). The paradigms commonly aligned with quantitative research are positivism, post-positivism and realism (Cooper & White, 2012). These paradigms tend to assert the belief that there are real-world objects, and that these are separate from human knowledge (Bryman, 2004). In this way, knowledge is considered to be an objective reality, and therefore truth can be discovered through impartial research. When undertaking research using a quantitative paradigm, the goal is to determine a relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable through measurement.

The main characteristics of a quantitative paradigm that are significant to this study, such as objectivity and testing, were adopted when addressing the four research questions (see section 3.1), as it was necessary to measure educator-child relationships and child wellbeing in order to determine their level and discover any links between the two. In the current study, the use of a standardised observational scale to measure levels of educator-child relationships and wellbeing levels of children from birth to 3 years aimed to uphold the strict protocol aligned with quantitative research to ensure that the researcher’s subjective bias would be minimised. A quantifiable projection of current educator-child relationship levels and child wellbeing levels would then provide a secure platform for further investigation of the four research questions.

Qualitative research aims to explore and understand social problems and phenomena, focusing on individual meaning and the complexity of social situations (Creswell, 2014; Greene, 2007). Some paradigms positioned in qualitative research
are interpretivism, critical theory and constructivism (Cooper & White, 2012).

Qualitative research paradigms assert that humans construct reality through unique experiences and development, thereby making this a rather subjective approach (Bryman, 2004). Within a qualitative paradigm is the assumption that “knowledge is conjectural (and antifoundational) – absolute truth can never be found” (Creswell, 2014, p. 7). Factors that contribute to constructs of reality in this way are subjective, and can be considered from an ecological perspective, for example interpersonal relationships, culture, religion and education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The main characteristics of a qualitative paradigm that relate to the current study, including subjectivity and social realities, were considered necessary when investigating the research issue, as the current study aimed to investigate factors influencing educator-child relationships within the ECEC settings. Various characteristics that could not be measured, for example educators’ perspectives, were instead collected using semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations to provide further insights and knowledge that would comprehensively address the four research questions.

Quantitative and qualitative paradigms are often regarded as opposing viewpoints, and so researchers are most likely to adopt one over the other when conducting research. However, this oppositional stance between paradigms was not taken in the current study, as it considered both quantitative and qualitative paradigms to contribute valuable perspectives and approaches that would provide a robust investigation of the research issue. In social science, the amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative paradigms is gaining momentum (Johnson, 2004) and is
supported by a pragmatic paradigm, which ultimately presented itself as a viable option for this study.

Pragmatism as a philosophy has been present in society since the late 19th century, derived from the works of James, Peirce, Mead and Dewey (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). When used in research, it informs a shrewd paradigm which advocates for the use of mixed methods within a study (Feilzer, 2010; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), thereby encompassing the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this way, pragmatism considers real life effect and consequences as vital components of meaning and truth (Dewey, 1920). Pragmatists assert that truth can be discovered, but it is ever-changing, based on our actions and engagement in the world; ultimately, no one can ever claim to possess a final truth (Dewey, 1920). This is particularly relevant to the current study, as the field of ECEC is known for undergoing constant and rapid changes through time, based on evolving understandings of child development (Ailwood, 2016).

Pragmatism offers a practical and scientific approach and is considered an attractive paradigm for researchers in the social sciences (Ormerod, 2006). Pragmatism positions the research issue or questions as central to the study, topping the hierarchy above all else, thereby allowing the adoption of any method that serves to best answer the research questions and understand the research problem (Creswell, 2014). In this way, qualitative and quantitative positions coalesce to create a meaningful and robust paradigm worthy of social science research. Creswell (2014) describes his views on a philosophical basis for pragmatist research eloquently, stating that
... Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research ... truth is what works at the time. It is not based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind. Thus, in mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of the research problem (p.11).

The concepts of changing truth and reality put forth by pragmatism were considered contextually relevant to the current study, as ECEC in Australia has evolved significantly over the past century (Wong & Press, 2016). This evolution has shaped contemporary understanding of ECEC through child development theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978), policy development informed by national regulations (ACECQA, 2013a) and educators’ pedagogical practice (DEEWR, 2009). Moreover, educator and child participants contribute their own unique experiences of reality to the ECEC settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and these serve to inform both educator-child relationships and child wellbeing. Furthermore, by adopting a pragmatist approach, the current study could employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data, thereby providing an in-depth exploration of the research issue.

Australian ECEC is a hotbed of complex social experiences, and particularly important to the development and wellbeing of young children (COAG, 2009). Ultimately, adopting a pragmatic paradigm in the current study was considered suitable to explore the social phenomenon of ‘relationships,’ and allowed for an
eclectic selection of research methods that served to comprehensively inform the research issue and provide new knowledge and contributions to the field of ECEC in regional Victoria.

3.4 Research Design

The research design encompasses key factors that provide the structure and foundation of this study, providing a purposeful plan that supports the entire research process (Creswell, 2014). The research design used in this thesis followed the one outlined by Yin (2009), who identifies six main stages to the research process: 1) plan, 2) design; 3) prepare; 4) collect; 5) analyse; and 6) share. Figure 3.3 presents how each of these six stages interact with one another during the research process.

Figure 3.3: Research design and process


In the way that the literature review informs the purpose of the study, the research design supports the process of the study. One of the most important
aspects of a robust research design lies within the research methods adopted to investigate the research issue (Creswell, 2014).

3.4.1 Research methods

The purpose of the current study was to provide comprehensive insights and new knowledge into the field of ECEC in two important quality areas – educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years. It was essential to the integrity of this research project that the methodological approach selected would provide the most comprehensive and pertinent results, and was suited to the project in a meaningful way (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). Creswell (2014) explains that depending on the research issue, some research approaches are more appropriate than others. As the current study aimed to determine levels of educator-child relationships and child wellbeing, a quantitative approach was considered suitable, since it supports the use of instruments that can work with large data sets and can produce a quantifiable result (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Additionally, the current study also aimed to explore factors that influence educator-child relationships, and in this instance, a qualitative approach was considered well suited for its ability to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the research issue through descriptive data collection (Yin, 2009). Therefore, a methodological approach that could combine qualitative and quantitative methods through triangulation was considered to be the most fitting. This methodological approach was mixed methods within a case study.

3.4.1.1 Case study

A case study supports an in-depth investigation of the research issue (Baxter & Jack, 2008), and an unravelling of the complexities of social settings to understand the intricate and interconnected processes found within (Denscombe, 2010). The
strength of a case study lies within its ability to provide rich detail on a research phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 2000); this is a useful approach when attempting to discover knowledge of individual and social phenomena, as it “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Typically, case studies are focused on a single case, or at least a small number of cases (Creswell, 2014). As such, they require a generous amount of time and resources during data collection and can provide an incredible wealth of information that describes an issue comprehensively, often discovering its underlying causes.

In this study, the researcher elected to adopt a specific lens, which was to investigate the research issue as it pertained to children living in regional Victoria, Australia. As described in Chapter 1 and discussed throughout Chapter 2, experiences, development and life outcomes of children living in regional areas of Australia are vastly different than their metropolitan counterparts (Hayes & Edwards, 2011). The further children live from metropolitan areas, the more potential there is that they will be geographically isolated, resulting in diminished access to basic services (Baxter et al., 2011) and fewer education opportunities supported by quality educators (White, 2015); this influences children’s early experiences, development and wellbeing (Baxter et al., 2011; McCallum & Price, 2016). Furthermore, due to distance issues, children and families living in regional areas have restricted access to goods, services and social interactions (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). As the current study was undertaken in a regional location, the researcher remained aware of the distinctive factors associated with regional life throughout the investigation, and was vigilant in undertaking observations pertaining to the uniqueness of the specific space.
Embedded within the regional focus, the current study required another specific lens to investigate children from birth to 3 years, due to the unique nature and critical importance of this age group (Shonkoff, 2006). As described in the literature review (Chapter 2), rapid brain development is occurring in the first 3 years of life (Mustard, 2006), which is supported by positive relationships with significant adults (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Attainment of a secure educator-child relationship in these early years is vital to ensure children have a secure base from which to confidently explore their environment (Dolby, 2007), thereby gaining important life skills, as well as fostering their cognitive and social development (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) and wellbeing (Graham, 2011). In order to investigate the relationship levels between children from birth to 3 years and their educator, an in-depth understanding of the aforementioned factors served to inform and support the research approach. Furthermore, the lens adopted required instruments specifically designed to investigate children from birth to 3 years old.

Often case studies work with a small sample size to enable in-depth investigation of the research issue, which limits the ability of the research findings to be generalised to the wider population (Creswell, 2014). In the case of the current study, using mixed methods within a case study allowed for a larger sample size (N = 102) and therefore the data can be considered to be representative of the population (Collins, 2010), resulting in robust findings that could be generalised, at least to regional areas in Victoria. Furthermore, this study can offer a template for a research design that could be easily replicated in a variety of national and international contexts.
3.4.1.2 Mixed methods

Using mixed method within a case study enables researchers to integrate qualitative and quantitative methods in order to examine the issue and answer research questions comprehensively:

... Mixed method educational inquiry includes multiple and diverse methods for gathering, analysing and representing educational phenomena within a framework that intentionally engages with different ways of knowing and valuing that the different methods embody (Greene, 2005, p. 208).

In other words, this approach enables the researcher to use the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods, thereby eliminating their limitations to produce quality complementary findings (Hesse-Biber, 2010). This is what Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) refer to as “stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and corroboration of findings ... adding insight and understanding that might be missed when only a single method is used” (p. 21).

Specifically, the current study opted to employ a convergent parallel mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014). This approach stipulates that equal weight be placed on both the quantitative and qualitative methods to collect the data. Then, both sets of data are analysed separately and the results are compared. As quantitative and qualitative data tends to yield different information that informs the research issue in different ways, the outcome of a convergence approach provides comprehensive answers of the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Figure 3.4 illustrates the process of a parallel mixed-methods convergence approach.
In keeping with a convergence parallel mixed methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected at the same time in this study, analysed separately and then converged to inform each Research Question (RQ), as outlined in Table 3.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research paradigm</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Respect, Reflect, Relate Relationship Scale (RRRRS)</td>
<td>Educators &amp; children</td>
<td>RQ1; RQ2; RQ4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing Scale (RRRWS)</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>RQ3; RQ4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>RQ1; RQ2; RQ3; RQ4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naturalistic observations</td>
<td>Educator &amp; children</td>
<td>RQ1; RQ2; RQ3; RQ4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adopting a convergence parallel mixed methods approach offered robust insights and answers to the four research questions, thereby providing a complete and full understanding of the research issue.

### 3.5 Research instruments

The appropriate selection of instruments employed for any given research project are vital for their ability to produce results that will answer the research
question (Creswell, 2014). There are many different types of research instruments that can be used in a research project, including observations, interviews, scales, videos and experiments (Greene, 2005). In the current study, instruments that are synonymous with both quantitative and qualitative approaches could be used. Figure 3.5 provides a visual representation of the links between methodology and instruments used in the current study.

![Figure 3.5: Research paradigms and instruments](image)

3.5.1 **Quantitative**

The quantitative data was collected using two standardised observation scales: the RRRRS and the RRRWS, which are two of four observation scales found in the Reflect Respect Relate (RRR) document (DECS, 2008). The RRR document was developed in South Australia by Pam Winter (2003), and informed by prominent past research in the ECEC field (Doherty-Derowski, 1995; Laevers et al., 1997; Mayre & Ulich, 1999; Pascal & Bertram, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The RRR observation scales support the ECEC quality agenda in Australia (COAG, 2009) by promoting educator practice, with strong links to the NQS (ACECQA, 2013b) and the
Therefore, the RRRRS and RRRWS were contextually appropriate to the current study, and served to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ4.

Reliability and validity were a consideration for the researcher when designing and undertaking the current study. Reliability is the extent of which the data collection procedures and mechanisms for information gathering are consistent (Keyton et al., 2004). Reliability ensures that the collection procedures and mechanisms being used to collect data will be strong enough to produce consistent and stable data when replicated by different researchers in different studies (Gibbs, 2007). To ensure the reliability of the quantitative instruments, the RRRRS and RRRWS were piloted by the researcher and principal supervisor before the main data collection phase of the research.

The pilot tests were undertaken in an ECEC setting that was separate from the research sample. To determine inter-rater reliability (the level of homogeneity in scores by two or more raters), a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used, as this is the most common way to determine reliability of quantitative instruments (Pallant, 2013). Cronbach’s coefficient alpha gives an indication of the average among all the items that make up the scale, and is represented by $k$ with values ranging from 0 to 1 (1 indicating greater reliability). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of a scale should be above .7, however values above .8 are preferable and suggest stronger levels of consistency. In the case of this study, Cronbach’s alpha was $k = .889$ for the RRRRS, and $k = 1$ for the RRRWS. These results suggest very good internal consistency and reliability (Pallant, 2013), and so the research could move forward with confidence.

Validity refers to the degree to which the research accurately reflects the issue being studied, and is an important factor of successful research (Rooney,
Without validity, the research cannot be considered reliable, and therefore generalizable; it is essentially judged worthless (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). In the case of this study, the researcher took the necessary steps to ensure validity. For example, skilled academics in the Faculty of Education (one principal and two associate supervisors) were involved in the research and instrument design. Furthermore, the researcher examined various observation scales used in past research to ensure the most pertinent and contextually appropriate instruments for measuring educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels were used to collect the data.

3.5.1.1 Relationship scale

The researcher of the current study examined several available relationship scales, to determine their appropriateness for the current study. One of the most universally recognised and highly regarded instruments for examining children’s early relationships through attachment was found to be the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, 1978). The Strange Situation is synonymous with measuring children’s attachment classifications in research, and was strictly informed by Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). As described in the literature review (Chapter 2), the Strange Situation is a controlled observational method that observes child (aged 9 to 18 months) attachment behaviours through a series of adult-child interactions in a controlled environment, including the arrival and departure of the adult, to determine the child’s response in order to assign an attachment classification. The observations are undertaken over a period of 20 minutes, and culminate in the identification of the child’s attachment classification. The Strange Situation is used often in attachment studies, as asserted in a meta-analysis undertaken by Van
IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg and Riksen-Walraven (2004). However, it can be considered overly clinical, and the ECEC environment was not judged an appropriate venue to undertake such controlled observations. Furthermore, identifying attachment classification was not the aim of this study.

Teacher (educator) reports are another way researchers examine educator-child relationships (Pianta 1994), where the child’s educator will answer a series of questions aimed to assess the relationship quality (Pianta, 1994). The literature presented in Chapter 2 identified a commonly used teacher report instrument, also derived from attachment theory: the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta, 1992). The STRS instrument focuses on closeness, dependency and conflict, as well as assessing the educators’ responsiveness and environmental factors. A limitation of the STRS and other teacher-reports is that findings from instruments such as these can suffer from bias, as the educator may assess their relationship with children from a socially desirable perspective. They also require more time and effort from teacher participants, which can act as a deterrent when it comes to recruitment. Furthermore, the STRS is designed for research with children aged 3 to 12, and therefore could not be adopted for the current study.

The attachment Q-Set (ACS) (Waters & Dean, 1985) is a naturalistic observation method suitable for use on children aged 1-5, and is considered a valid method for measuring attachment (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2004). The 100 items found in the AQS Observations assess children’s behaviour to determine their attachment classification. A limitation of this instrument is that it focuses on secure or insecure attachment, and does not identify variations of insecure attachment. As
it pertains to the current study, the AQS was not suitable as it is designed for children aged 1-5.

The Child-Caregiver Observation System (C-COS), designed as part of the Early Head Start National Evaluation, has also been used successfully in determining the quality of educator-child relationships (Boller, Sprachman & Early Head Start Research Consortium, 1998). The C-COS is a child-focused observation instrument, which concentrates on behaviours such as laughing, crying, smiling, caregiver behaviour and child behaviour in any ECEC environment over a two-hour period. Ultimately, this instrument assesses the quality and frequency of caregiving behaviours to determine relationship status and care experiences of children in a variety of settings (Boller, Sprachman & EHS Research Consortium, 1998). The observations are coded in order to identify quality ratings. As with STRS, the age group was not appropriate, as this scale is used from children aged 1 to 5 years.

The Adult Involvement Scale (Howe & Phyllis, 1987) was also considered for its ability to examine the adult-child relationship, as it has been used in some of the research projects examined in Chapter 2. The Adult Involvement Scale uses observations of adult and child engagement, with a focus on the reciprocity and complexity during interactions. The seven classifications that can be found using the Adult Involvement Scale are: 1) Ignore; 2) Monitor; 3) Routine; 4) Minimal; 5) Simple; 6) Elaborated; and 7) Intense. Again, the Adult Involvement Scale was not appropriate for the target age group of the current study, even though it was closely related, as it focuses on 11-month to 30-month-olds. Also, this scale would not determine the current levels of educator-child relationships, but rather identify the type of interaction sustained by educators and children.
Researchers examining educator-child relationships are required to have a solid understanding of attachment theory (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). A standardised, objective and systematic instrument that would identify the relationship level between individual children and their educators, as well as a whole class’ average, was required to answer RQ1 and inform RQ2 and RQ4. The observation scale selected needed to be contextually appropriate to the regional Australian context, and appropriate for use with children and educators in their ECEC environment. Furthermore, the instrument selected needed to be suitable for children from birth to 3 years. This instrument was found to be the RRRRS (DECS, 2008), developed in South Australia in 2008.

3.5.1.1.1 Reflect Respect Relate Relationship scale

The RRR document was developed in South Australia for inquiry and reflective practice purposes in ECEC settings, and has been used to collect data in Australian research (for example Ebbeck, Winter, Russo, Yim, Teo-Zuzarte & Goh, 2011). The RRR includes observational scales across four domains: 1) relationships; 2) active learning environment; 3) wellbeing; and 4) involvement. The RRRRS was informed by prominent research in the field of child relationships (Doherty-Derowski, 1995).

The RRRRS is designed to record characteristics of educator-child relationships, measuring both the quantity and quality of children’s interactions and behaviours with educators, to establish a relationship classification (DECS, 2008). Four relationship signals are examined: 1) responsiveness; 2) positive interactions; 3) quality verbal exchanges; and 4) appropriateness. Table 3.2 presents an overview of what is examined within each signal.
### Table 3.2: Descriptions of the four RRRRS signals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signal</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness</strong></td>
<td>Children have physical and emotional access to educators and receive reliable and consistent responses. Educators take into account information from the child’s family, home and culture and children’s temperament, mood and situation in their responses. The child’s lead is followed. Children’s verbal and non-verbal signals and cues are observed, listened and responded to respectfully, sensitively and promptly. Children are comforted quickly when distressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive interactions</strong></td>
<td>Educators are welcoming and communication with children is happy, respectful, caring and positive. Children’s bids are recognised and extended. An active interest is taken in what children are involved and interested in. Educators encourage children through support and acknowledgment of their efforts and processes. Educators engage in play and experiences with children including one-on-one interactions. Children have access to models of and help for peaceful resolution to conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality verbal exchanges</strong></td>
<td>Parents are engaged in respectful, reciprocal communication with educators. Children’s home language and the way they use language is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchanges. Verbal exchanges go well beyond instruction. Educators and children engage in sustained two-way turn-taking conversation. This joint attention of both partners is crucial to the construction of understandings, providing children not only with scaffolds and mediation through language but also the motivation to learn. Child initiated interactions are built upon and educator responses and interactions reflect a child’s developing understandings and interests. Time is given for children to express themselves and time is given for children to respond verbally. Wonder, exclamations, questions and comments are responded to. Non-verbal is used to add meaning to words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriateness</strong></td>
<td>Children have access to and experience of caring behaviour from educators. Where possible, children are spoken with in their home language. They are addressed by their name, correctly pronounced. Educators treat children fairly and provide models and guidance in the use of non-discriminatory language and behaviour. Educators talk with children about what is happening or is going to happen. Children’s efforts rather than attributes are acknowledged. There are realistic expectations of what children can and will do. Emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported. Children receive support and guidance when overwhelmed. Hostility and aggression are constructively discouraged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The four signals focused on the specific nature of interactions between the child and educator. Each signal contains indicators (N = 45) that were used to assess these aspects of the educator-child relationship. Table 3.3 lists the indicators of each signal that were assessed during the observational period.
### Table 3.3: Indicators of the RRRRS signals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Child receives reliable/predictable/consistent responses</td>
<td>• Information about the child’s family, home and culture is used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information about the child’s family, home and culture is used</td>
<td>• Child has physical access and emotional access to the educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s signals and cues are observed and listened to with attention and respect</td>
<td>• Child’s nonverbal and verbal cues and social signals are reacted to sensitively and promptly; child’s lead is followed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s nonverbal and verbal cues and social signals are reacted to sensitively and promptly; child’s lead is followed</td>
<td>• Child’s temperament, current mood and situation is considered respectfully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is comforted quickly when distressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive interactions</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Child is engaged in interactive play with educator</td>
<td>• Communication towards the child has a happy, respectful tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communication towards the child has a happy, respectful tone</td>
<td>• Welcoming gestures and eye contact are directed towards the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Welcoming gestures and eye contact are directed towards the child</td>
<td>• Warmth and affection are shared with the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Warmth and affection are shared with the child</td>
<td>• Active interest is taken in the child’s activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Active interest is taken in the child’s activity</td>
<td>• Child is involved with the educator 1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is involved with the educator 1:1</td>
<td>• Child is given encouragement through support and acknowledgement of effort and process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child has access to models and help for peaceful resolution of conflict</td>
<td>• Child receives expression of positive feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child receives expression of positive feelings</td>
<td>• Positive feelings are directed towards child e.g. laughs/smiles together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive feelings are directed towards child e.g. laughs/smiles together</td>
<td>• Questions and comments of interest to the child are made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Questions and comments of interest to the child are made</td>
<td>• Child’s social bids are extended/elaborated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s social bids are extended/elaborated</td>
<td>• Child is guided by suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality verbal exchange</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Educator engages in respectful, reciprocal communication exchanges with parents</td>
<td>• Child is engaged in sustained two-way, turn-taking conversations and interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is engaged in sustained two-way, turn-taking conversations and interactions</td>
<td>• Communication/interaction/conversations are initiated that reflect the child’s developing understandings and interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communication/interaction/conversations are initiated that reflect the child’s developing understandings and interests</td>
<td>• Child is given time to make expressions understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is given time to make expressions understood</td>
<td>• Child is given time to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is given time to respond</td>
<td>• Child-initiated interactions are built upon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child-initiated interactions are built upon</td>
<td>• Child and educator are engaged in discussions of an activity in which they’re both engaged, chatting about what’s going on, what’s being observed, what’s being experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child and educator are engaged in discussions of an activity in which they’re both engaged, chatting about what’s going on, what’s being observed, what’s being experienced</td>
<td>• Child’s wonder, exclamations, questions an comments are responded to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s wonder, exclamations, questions an comments are responded to</td>
<td>• Child shares in social language games initiated by educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child shares in social language games initiated by educator</td>
<td>• Child’s non-verbal language is used to add meaning to words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s non-verbal language is used to add meaning to words</td>
<td>• Child’s home language is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s home language is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchange</td>
<td>• Child is greeted when arrives, awakens, leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is greeted when arrives, awakens, leaves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Child is spoken with in home language (if other than English) where possible</td>
<td>• Close contact between child and educator is in culturally familiar ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Close contact between child and educator is in culturally familiar ways</td>
<td>• Child has access to models of caring behaviours amongst educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child has access to models of caring behaviours amongst educators</td>
<td>• Child is engaged in sustained interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is engaged in sustained interaction</td>
<td>• Child’s efforts are acknowledged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child’s efforts are acknowledged</td>
<td>• Child is treated fairly (is not discriminated against or judged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child is treated fairly (is not discriminated against or judged)</td>
<td>• Child has access to models of guidance in the use of non-discriminatory language and behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

168
- Child is told what is going to happen, what is happening  
- There are realistic expectations of what the child can/will do  
- Child receives indirect forms of support and guidance when overwhelmed – distraction, suggestion, choice, reminder, redirection  
- Child’s emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported – trust and safety support harmful/overwhelming emotions  
- Child is called by name, correctly pronounced  
- Child’s hostility and aggression are constructively discouraged


The RRRRS required six 5-minute observations of each child over a six-hour period, preferably three in the morning and three in the afternoon. A record of the occurrence and frequency of specific behaviours is documented on the RRRRS rating sheet, with a value assigned to each occurrence: positive, negative, missed opportunity, and no opportunity. Table 3.4 presents how the observations are categorised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring positively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring negatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Missed opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed through missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The RRRRS observations and judgment are used to assign a Low (L), Medium (M) or High (H) rating for each signal. From an aggregation of L, M or H, a level of 0-5 was given to each child’s relationship with their educator. Table 3.5 presents a description of each of the five possible levels that children can attain. A mean level using all children’s data was calculated to represent the setting as a whole, with anything below M = 2.5 considered an unsatisfactory educator-child relationship (DECS, 2008). Data derived from the RRRRS addressed RQ1, RQ2 and RQ4.
Table 3.5: RRRRS rating descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>No interactions with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restrictive, controlling, dominating interactions; social bids or cues for comfort go unnoticed or rejected, discounted, avoided or ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions; minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non-supportive</td>
<td>Functional; interactions are routine, technical, mostly organisational or in response to physical need; superficial contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively; some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with interruptions; educator initiates contact; not all signals are present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extremely supportive</td>
<td>Securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth; educator invites and shares positive and reciprocal, sustained interactions; all signals present.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


3.5.1.2 Wellbeing

The wellbeing definition adopted in the current study was outlined in Chapter 2 as children’s feelings of happiness and satisfaction, as well as their social functioning and dispositions (Ebbeck et al., 2015). As such, an observational scale that focused on the aforementioned signals of the wellbeing domain was needed, and provided by the RRRWS (DECS, 2008). The RRRRS and RRRWS are two of the four observational scales of the RRR document (DECS, 2008). Specifically, it is recommended in the RRR document that the RRRWS be used in conjunction with the RRRRS, as a way to measure wellbeing as an outcome of educator-child relationships (DECS, 2008).

3.5.1.2.1 Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing scale

The RRRWS was informed by prominent past research (Mayre & Ulich, 1999; Laevers et al., 1997). The RRRWS was designed to identify children’s levels of wellbeing by observing and assessing their behavioural and verbal expressions of
ease and confidence in the ECEC setting, and is measured through three signals: 1) happiness and satisfaction; 2) social functioning; and 3) dispositions. Table 3.6 presents an overview of the focus of each signal during observations. These three signals focused on the specific nature the child’s behaviour as an expression of wellbeing, and how the child interacted with the ECEC setting, other children and their educator. Each of the three RRRWS signals had subheadings, within which are outlined indicators (N = 55) used to assess these aspects of wellbeing.

Table 3.6: Description of the RRRWS signals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness and satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children are confident in themselves. They happily express their needs, ideas and feelings. Children initiate and engage in activities, interactions and play. They take considered risks, create realistic challenges and recover from unsuccessful attempts reasonably quickly, asking for help when needed. They recognise and gradually regulate their own needs, wishes and feelings, confidently expressing their preferences and opinions, and accept verbal and non-verbal attention from others. Vitality is evident. Children are alert and active, spontaneous and lively. They demonstrate pleasure in authentic experiences, enjoy fun and humour and engage in experiences with enthusiasm. Periods of calmness and the regulation of rhythms of activity, rest and relaxation are evident.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social functioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children show social initiative. They reach out others, and are receptive and responsive to stimuli or suggestions. They attract others and negotiate effectively. Children are assertive with a sense of their own space and object when their personal rights are threatened. Flexibility and coping strategies are apparent in the way they manage distress, confusion, frustration and excitement. They remain accessible when distressed and seek and accept support and comfort. They cooperate as members of a group and accept shared decisions and boundaries. Children have a positive attitude towards warmth and closeness with trusted others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When children’s wellbeing is sound they are open and receptive, find pleasure in exploring and are alert and aware. They are curious. They take time to wonder, reflect and experiment, to ask questions and investigate and to consider alternatives. Pleasure in the sensory experiences associated with taste, sound, smell, sight movement and touch is evident. Children are robust. They persist with optimism and are not easily distracted when concentrating.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.7 identifies each indicator found within the subheadings of the three RRRWS signals.

### Table 3.7: Indicators of the RRRWS signals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness and satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence, self esteem – the child:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trusts (biological needs are satisfied without anxiety – feeds, settles, toilets, cares for calmly)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expresses wants, needs, ideas and feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tries out things, risking the possibility of being unsuccessful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recovers from unsuccessful attempts relatively quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Looks for/creates realistic challenges for self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asks for help when needed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Initiates and engages in interaction, social and pretend play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of self – the child:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Recognises and increasingly regulates own needs, wishes and feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Confidentially expressed wishes, preferences, opinions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shares the joy and success of self and others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accepts verbal and non-verbal attention from others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitality – the child:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Is alert and active</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is spontaneous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has lively posture and movements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enjoyment/sense of humour – the child:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrates pleasure in authentic experiences and ways</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoys fun, jokes, humour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engages in experiences with enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to relax – the child:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Signals need for rest, retreat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regulates rhythms of activity and rest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has periods of calmness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social functioning</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social initiative – the child:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reaches out to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is receptive and responds to the stimuli/suggestions of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attracts other children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertive – the child:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Has a sense of own self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is not unduly pressured by claims of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Objects when personal rights are threatened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wants to be considered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asks for help/comfort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Coping/flexibility – the child: |  |
- Is flexible, accepts help/support when needed
- Recovers from distress/excitement/confusion/frustration
- Can be comforted
- Calms/quietens
- Can be distracted if appropriate
- Remains ‘accessible’ when distressed
- Cooperates
- Accepts bottom lines/boundaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness – the child:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoys being in close proximity with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reaches out for physical contact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring – the child:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is alert, open, direct body language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is aware of those around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tries new and unmastered activity positively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Takes time to wonder and experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is curious, questions, actively seeks out things to investigate/explore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Considers alternatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pleasure in sensory experiences – the child:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Shows pleasure in being immersed in sensory experiences – taste, sound, smell, sight, movement and touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoys meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoys smelling things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoys movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Listens to music and natures sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visually tracks and observes attentively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses materials expressively and with enjoyment e.g. dough, clay, sand, paint, collage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence/robustness – the child:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Tries again when faced with a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Persists with optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is not easily distracted when concentrating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The researcher is again required to collect six 5-minute observations over a 6-hour period, preferably three in the morning and three in the afternoon. To follow this procedure, the observations from the current study varied in time of the day and space/activity to ensure a realistic representation of the child’s experiences.
A record of the occurrence and frequency of specific behaviours is documented on the RRRWS observation sheet, with a value assigned to each occurrence: positive, negative, missed opportunity, and no opportunity (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8: RRRWS indicator descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring positively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring negatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Missed opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed through missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed through no opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The RRRWS inform the assignment of Low (L), Medium (M) or High (H) for each signal. From an aggregation of L, M or H, a wellbeing level of 1-5 was assigned to each individual child. Table 3.9 described what each level means in terms of the child’s levels of wellbeing.

Table 3.9: RRRWS rating descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non supportive</td>
<td>Emotionally uncomfortable, displays of negative symptoms e.g. crying, hurting, being withdrawn, unhappy, tense, easily overwhelmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Seldom displays enjoyment, signs of level 1 about half the time, alternating with neutral and some positive signals, may take pleasure in disrespectful ways e.g. hurting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non supportive</td>
<td>Occasional signs of emotional discomfort, generally appears ‘quite happy’, reasonable self-confidence and enjoyment without intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Generally happy with few signs of emotional discomfort, adequately succeeds in meeting and regulating own needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Totally supportive</td>
<td>High levels of trust and confidence. Initiates positive connections with others, radiates vitality and self-esteem, shows initiative, curiosity and pleasure in activities; receptive, communicative, self-guided and flexible, lots of positive interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean level for all children in the research sample (N = 92) was calculated to represent the ECEC setting as a whole, with 3.5 considered the lowest acceptable level of child wellbeing (DECS, 2008). Data derived from the RRRWS was used to inform RQ3 and RQ4.

3.5.2 Qualitative

The qualitative data was collected using two data sources: 1) semi-structured interviews; and 2) naturalistic observations. These aimed to provide further insight into the research issue and provide answers to research questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 alongside the RRRRS and RRRWS data through the convergence mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014).

The semi-structured interview questions were piloted previous to the main data collection phase of the research. The pilot test aimed to detect any possible confusion on behalf of the interviewee, as well as to determine the duration and relevance of the designed interview questions (Yin, 2009). The pilot interviews spanned between 14 and 23 minutes, which was a close approximation of the time predicted by the researcher. The recording device tested was found to be of high quality, which would support the later interview transcription of interview data.

Notes were taken during the interview, which revealed that two minor adjustments needed to be made to the questions to increase their ability to produce data that would answer the research questions: 1) inclusion of research question 10; and 2) inclusion of research question 15. Also, two minor adjustments were made to increase interviewee comprehension, including: 1) adjusting the sentence structure of question 2 to enhance clarity; and 2) including additional information in question 5 to improve clarity.
3.5.2.1 **Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews are considered an integral part of case study research (Yin, 2009), as face-to-face communication allows for rich data to be derived (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011, p. 11). Specifically, semi-structured interviews produce robust data, as they pursue answers through predetermined questions, while also allowing the researcher the opportunity and flexibility to further probe participants’ responses (Mukherji & Albon, 2011). In this way, semi-structured interviews can deviate from the pre-planned questions slightly, skilfully guided by the researcher, to uncover additional insights into and understandings of the research issue (Guion, et al., 2011).

In the current study, the semi-structured interview contained 15 predetermined questions, separated into four parts: 1) educators’ background; 2) educators’ perspectives on relationships; 3) how educators develop relationships; and 4) how educators view their relationships with children (see Appendix F). These predetermined questions were informed by the National Quality Standards quality area 5 “questions to guide reflective practice” (ACECQA, 2013b, p. 121), albeit slightly modified, with the intent of investigating educator-child relationships from a practical perspective.

The semi-structured interviews were undertaken in the educators’ ECEC setting, in a location of their choosing. This was to limit the potential discomfort on the part of the educator, and to ensure the semi-structured interviews did not disrupt their practice. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, with the educators’ permission, and later transcribed by the researcher. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.
The focus of the interviews was to gain an understanding of educators’ perspectives on what constitutes educator-child relationships, and also what factors influence their relationships with children, based on their personal experience, pedagogy and practice. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews were designed to provide data that answered research RQ1 and RQ2.

3.5.2.2 **Naturalistic observations**

Naturalistic observations provide additional insights into any research project (Mukherji & Albon, 2011) offering a description of behaviour that occurs in the natural environment in which research is undertaken. Naturalistic observations are particularly robust and strengthen validity when the researcher can spend prolonged periods of time in the research setting, as this allows for an “in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). The researcher spent between three and four weeks (Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5:30pm) in each ECEC setting (N = 5) during the data collection process.

A non-participant naturalistic observation approach was adopted in the current study, meaning that the researcher observed the behaviours of participants within their natural environment, without taking an active part or manipulating the environment in any way (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Maintaining a non-participatory role in the research ensured that data from the naturalistic observations were not biased or corrupted by the researcher’s presence. While naturalistic observations require a significant amount of the researcher’s time, the data that emerges is certainly considered worthy of the time invested (Yin, 2009).
In the current study, naturalistic observations were taken objectively and precisely as they occurred in anecdotal assessment form, thereby ensuring the validity of any data that arose from this method (Mukherji & Albon, 2011). These naturalistic observations were documented in writing over the data collection period. The researcher did not allocate specific times or spaces for the collection of naturalistic observations, but rather would record educator and child behaviours and conversations wherever and whenever they occurred throughout the day, when the context (educator-child relationships/child wellbeing) was considered relevant.

The observations were recorded on a template developed by the researcher (see Appendix G), which includes a title, the date, time, setting, child/ren and educator information as well as the observation itself. In this way, the observation data could be appropriately presented in the findings to inform the research issue. During the data convergence process, children’s individual educator-child relationship level and/or child wellbeing level were added to the naturalistic observations, to provide more insight into the behaviours and experiences captured.

The naturalistic observations recorded were often extensions of the observations undertaken for the RRRRS and RRRWS, as the researcher was focused on the individual child and educator as they interacted with each other in the ECEC setting. However, separate observations were also often collected. The researcher also noted direct quotes, and detailed descriptions of implications arising from interactions or discussions. It was considered that naturalistic observation process adopted by the current study would later support the quantitative findings and provide more insight into the research issue.
3.6 Sample

The selection process required a variety of sampling techniques to be employed, in keeping with the research design and methodology. In the current study, three sampling techniques were employed: 1) purposive – for selecting ECEC settings; 2) random – for selecting children from within the ECEC settings; and 3) convenience – for selecting educators working with the child participants within the ECEC settings.

Firstly, the purposive sampling technique for selecting ECEC settings involved selecting all settings that fell within the parameters of the research issue (Mukherji & Albon, 2011; Roberts-Holmes, 2011), which was specifically focused on a regional town in Victoria.

Secondly, a convenience sampling technique was used to select educator participants, based on their availability within the research space (Creswell, 2014). In the selected ECEC settings, educators were chosen who worked with birth to 3 year old children who would later be invited to participate in the research.

Thirdly, child participants needed to be recruited. Creswell (2014) recommends that random sampling techniques be employed for the focal participants, as it ensures all individuals have equal opportunity to take part in the research, thereby giving unbiased data representative of the total research population.

The sample size required for this study was specific in nature, as the RRRRS and RRRWS scales stipulate the inclusion of a minimum of 40% of the total number of children per room if an overall mean is to be assigned (DECS, 2008). The total
The number of children who participated in this study was 92, as well as 10 educators, giving an overall sample size of 102. A sample size of 102 participants is generally considered to be a medium-sized project (Kline, 2005), and based on the mixed methods used to collect data it can be considered representative of the population (Collins, 2010).

### 3.6.1 ECEC settings

In ECEC settings, children from birth to 6-years are cared for and educated by qualified professionals, and must adhere to the strict regulations and requirements outlined in the National Quality Framework that is monitored by ACECQA, the national accreditation body of Australian ECEC (ACECQA, 2013a). The current study focused solely on long day care (LDC) ECEC settings, which are the most common for children to attend in Australia (ABS, 2010). LDC settings offer care and educational experiences for children from birth to 6 years, and typically operate for up to 10 hours per day, 48 weeks a year. In Australia, there are currently 14,089 approved ECEC LDC settings in operation, of which 1123 are in Victoria (ACECQA, 2016). In the regional location where the current study was undertaken, there are nine ECEC LDC settings, although only six were in operation at the time of the research data collection.

Initial contact was made by the researcher via telephone with each setting to briefly inform coordinators of the research and invited them to participate. Follow up face-to-face meetings were then undertaken in order to distribute Plain Language Statements (PLS) and organisational consent forms. In total, five coordinators gave consent for their settings to participate. This provided a response rate of 83.33% for organisations.
3.6.2 Participants

Participants of the current study included 92 children and 10 educators from the 5 participating ECEC settings.

3.6.2.1 Educators

Once organisational consent was gained, the researcher recruited educators working with children from birth to 3 years in the participating ECEC settings. These educators were all female, with years of work experience in the ECEC field ranging from 6 to 16-years (M = 7.8).

All educator participants were required to hold a Diploma of Children’s Services qualification (or equivalent), which is attained after 2 years of study in a Vocational Education and Training setting, and is a level 5 qualification; the highest qualification being at a level 10 (Australian Qualification Framework Council [AQFC], 2013). The skills and knowledge Diploma-graduate educators have in Australia is identified in Table 3.10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Technical and theoretical knowledge and concepts, with depth in some areas within a field of work and learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Cognitive and communication skills to identify, analyse, synthesise and act on information from a range of sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive, technical and communication skills to analyse, plan, design and evaluate approaches to unpredictable problems and/or management requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specialist technical and creative skills to express ideas and perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication skills to transfer knowledge and specialised skills to others and demonstrate understanding of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having a Diploma qualification was the only inclusion criterion for educators, as it is considered the most basic quality qualification for room leaders in ECEC settings (ACECQA, 2013a), and this also ensured the data was not influenced by the educators’ level of training in the ECEC field.

The Diploma-qualified educator of each participating room was approached in person by the researcher to explain the research and invite them to participate through the PLS. Once the PLS was read and discussed, the educator gave, or refused to give, consent for their participation in the research. Educators were required to participate in a semi-structured interview and be observed using naturalistic observations, the RRRRS and RRRWS. All educators invited to participate (N = 10) gave informed consent and were reassured that their contribution to the research would remain anonymous, in accordance with ethical approval.

3.6.2.2 Children

The next cohort of participants required for the current study were children from birth to 3 years old. The researcher identified the minimum number of participants required to ensure validity using the RRRRS (40% of children per room). For example, one birth-to-2 room had a total of 18 children enrolled, therefore a minimum number of eight children would have to be included in the sample to ensure the validity of the RRRRS results (DECS, 2008). In total, 92 children participated in the research through the collection of naturalistic observations, the RRRRS and RRRWS. The children of this study were aged from 5 months to 36 months (M = 23.5; SD = 8.8). The percentage of male and female participants was very similar, with 51% (n = 48) males and 47% (n = 44) females. Child participants attended the ECEC setting between one and five days per week (M = 2.58).
Third party consent was used to recruit child participants. Parents were approached in person by the researcher when dropping off or picking up their child from the ECEC setting. Once parents had read and understood the PLS, the parent then gave, or refused to give, third party consent for their child to participate in the research. This procedure was repeated in each service until the minimum required number of participants was gained for each room.

3.7 Ethics

In order for any research project to be considered successful, ethical approval must be gained. Coady (2010) expresses that “concern for ethics both in the planning and execution stage of research can add to the quality of the research” (p. 82). In this research project, careful ethical consideration was given to ensure participants were not at risk of harm or discomfort in any way.

In order to ensure the integrity of the research, and that the stipulated guidelines of the research were adhered to, ethics approval from the Deakin University Ethics Committee was gained on May 10, 2013 (HAE-13-024), and approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was received on May 13, 2013 (see Appendix A & B).

The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics document (Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2016) was examined by the researcher before any contact was made with services. The researcher considered the ethical practice required to uphold when engaging with educators, parents and children within ECEC settings. Professionalism, caution and respect when interacting with all participants were
maintained, and all settings involved in the research project were disrupted as little as possible by the researcher.

Organisation, participant and third party consent were obtained from all before any research was undertaken. This was considered to be informed consent, as participants were provided with a clear PLS, and also had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions in person. Revocation of consent forms were provided to all participants and organisations, which informed participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without consequence to themselves.

The researcher established trust with participants and protecting participants from harm was of the highest priority, which promoted the integrity of the research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher ensured the anonymity of all participants, in order to protect their privacy, by using pseudonyms throughout the analysis, in this thesis, and in all other publications arising from the dissemination of the research findings. It is important to note that all data collection methods involving children were non-intrusive, with no direct contact or interactions taking place between the researcher and the children at any time.

Hard copy data is stored in a locked filing cabinet, within a locked office, at Deakin University. Soft copy data is stored on a password-locked computer, with USB backup soft copies stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data was inputted using codes, so there is no chance of identification. Data will be stored safely and securely for a period of no less than five years. After this period, data will be destroyed efficiently if need be.
3.8 Data analysis

The researcher underwent training and had extensive experience in taking child observations through four years of academic training in ECEC, and nine years of working in ECEC settings. The researcher has also undertaken a statistical analysis workshop and an NVivo training workshop prior to data analysis. The data analysis experience determines the researchers’ ability and accuracy in using the data analysis techniques required for the current study, described below.

In line with a convergence parallel mixed method approach (see 3.4.1.2), quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and then merged in order to compare and contrast findings, which would answer the research questions (see Table 3.1). Two software programmes were used to analyse the data: 1) IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20, which is used for statistical and descriptive analysis of data; and 2) qualitative data analysis (NVivo) version 10, which was used to organise and analyse non-numerical data. Both SPSS and NVivo encompass various analysis techniques, several of which were employed by the current study, as outlined in Table 3.11.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis technique</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive analysis (SPSS)</td>
<td>To determine the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent sample t-test (SPSS)</td>
<td>To compare the mean score, on some continuous variable, for two different groups of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-way between group analysis of variance (SPSS)</td>
<td>To compare the mean score of more than two groups, involving one independent variable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (SPSS)</td>
<td>To describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic analysis (NVivo)</td>
<td>To examine and determine themes within data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word frequency (NVivo)</td>
<td>To discover the frequency of specified words within transcripts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before analysis was undertaken, data was inputted into the corresponding software packages. Data from the RRRRS and RRRWS was double entered into SPSS version 20, and then screened and cleaned to ensure accuracy of analysis. The process of screening the data involves two steps: 1) checking for errors in the data file, which requires inspection of the frequencies of all variables; and 2) finding and correcting errors, if any (Pallant, 2013). Naturalistic observation and semi-structured interview data was entered into NVivo, and coded using nodes (themes). Each research question required the use of SPSS and NVivo analysis techniques.

3.8.1 Research question 1

In order to determine the level of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings, descriptive analysis was performed on the RRRRS data. This process provided a basic analysis of the data through mean scores and standard deviation, which were computed for each child participant in order to produce an overall level of educator-child relationship found between each child and their educator, and then a mean score for the sample (N = 92).

Further descriptive analysis was then undertaken using the RRRRS data in order to identify how each of the four relationship domain signals – including 1) responsiveness; 2) positive interactions; 3) quality verbal exchange; and 4) appropriateness – was contributing to the levels of educator-child relationships found in the sample. Descriptive analysis of the RRRRS signals would provide additional insight into the overall educator-child relationship level by identifying which signals were performing well, or underperforming.
Additionally, thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken using NVivo in order to discover educators’ practical experiences and perspectives on their relationships with children, to provide further insight into the levels of educator-child relationships found in the RRRRS.

Finally, naturalistic observations underwent thematic analysis to support and strengthen the findings from the RRRRS and semi-structured interviews. These naturalistic observations captured educator-child interactions and behaviours, which were used to provide rich narrative snapshots of the educator-child relationships that would inform RQ1.

3.8.2 Research question 2

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean score of female and male participants, in order to determine if the gender of children influences the educator-child relationship level, as has been found in previous research presented in Chapter 2 (for example Ahnert et al., 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes et al., 2000; Hughes et al., 2001). Additionally, an independent sample t-test was also used to determine if educators’ years of work experience influenced the educator-child relationship. The effect size of the independent sample t-tests was discovered using eta squared, which is most commonly used in research (Pallant, 2013). The eta squared was calculated manually by the researcher using the formula below:

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + \left( N_1 + N_2 - 2 \right)}$$
The guidelines for interpreting the eta square outlined by Cohen (1988) serve to identify the size of the difference between the two groups, for example: .01 – .05 = small effect; .06 – 0.13 = medium effect; .14 and above = large effect. By employing this method, the difference between groups could be determined, and used to inform RQ2.

An ANOVA was performed with the demographic information and the RRRRS data to determine if the number of days per week children attended the ECEC setting was a factor that influenced educator-child relationship levels. An ANOVA is used to compare more than two groups, using one independent variable. An F ratio is calculated, which represents the variance between the groups divided by the variance within the groups (Pallant, 2013). To further analyse the difference between children’s ECEC attendance per week and educator-child relationship levels using the RRRRS, a post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test was undertaken to determine what significant differences existed between the number of days children attended ECEC settings (Pallant, 2013).

Thematic analysis and word frequency was performed on the semi-structured interview transcripts data using NVivo, in order to identify factors that could be influencing educator-child relationships. The word frequency revealed the words used most often in the interview transcripts, and identified the percentage of educators who spoke those words. The findings from the word frequency provided a foundation that supported further thematic analysis, during which specific themes were uncovered and categorised in order to provide insights into factors that influence educator-child relationships.
Naturalistic observations also underwent thematic analysis, and were
categorised according to the themes identified from the semi-structured interviews.
In this way, the naturalistic observations would support the semi-structured
interview data. Naturalistic observation data was also analysed according to the
RRRRS and RRRWS data, which would provide more insight into the levels of
educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing. The naturalistic observations
therefore were positioned to compare and contrast data from both the RRRRS and
semi-structured interviews, which would provide more comprehensive findings
based on the similarities and differences found.

3.8.3 Research question 3

In order to determine the wellbeing levels of children, descriptive analysis
was performed on the RRRWS data. This process provided a basic analysis of the
data through mean scores and standard deviation, which were computed for each
child participant in order to produce an overall child wellbeing level of each child,
and then a mean score for the sample (N = 92).

Further descriptive analysis was then undertaken using the RRRWS data in
order to identify how each of the three wellbeing domain signals – including 1)
happiness and satisfaction; 2) social functioning; and 3) dispositions) was
contributing to the child wellbeing levels found in the sample. Descriptive analysis of
the three RRRWS signals would provide additional insight into the overall child
wellbeing level by identifying which signals were performing well, or
underperforming.

Thematic analysis of the naturalistic observation data was performed using
NVivo. These naturalistic observations captured child interactions and behaviours,
which were used to provide rich snapshots of child wellbeing in the ECEC setting, presented as a narrative. The naturalistic observation data provided further insight into child wellbeing levels, which would comprehensively answer RQ3.

3.8.4 Research question 4

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test \( r \) was performed using the RRRRS and RRRWS data to determine if there was a correlation between educator-child relationships levels and child wellbeing levels. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables and is represented by \( r \). The strength of the relationship is indicated by the size of the value of the correlation coefficient, which can range from -1 to 1 (Pallant, 2013). A correlation of 0 would indicate no relationship, 1 would indicate a perfect positive correlation, and -1 would indicate a perfect negative correlation (Pallant, 2013). Cohen (1988) suggests the following guidelines to interpret the size of the value: small \( r = .10 \) to .29; medium \( r = .30 \) to .49; or large \( r = .50 \) to .10.

The culmination of all data collection and analysis techniques resulted in findings that answered the four research questions, which are presented in Chapter 4.

3.9 Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology. The conceptual framework was outlined, and pragmatism was presented as the theoretical framework that supported the study. The research design described and justified the use of mixed methods within a case study as an appropriate method in the pursuit to answers to
the four research questions. The research sample, ethical considerations, data collection instruments and analysis techniques were also presented, which informed the processes and procedures of the research. Chapter 4 will present the findings derived from the data that answer the four research questions.
Chapter 4 Findings

Vignette 4.1 describes a close, nurturing relationship between educator and child, and the internal conflict that arises when educators recognise that their relationships with all children perhaps are not so positive. The personal reflection journey vignettes are not data from the current study, but rather a creative amalgamation of the researcher’s educator-child relationship experiences over her nine years teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

Vignette 4.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 3

The educator stood beside the empty cot, rocking the child in her arms, trying to get her to sleep. The child appeared to be wide-awake, and was smiling up at the educator; she smiled back warmly. The educator stroked the child’s cheek, and hummed a lullaby as she continued to rock the child. Normally, the educator would not spend this long rocking a child to sleep, as this practice was very time consuming. However, the educator did not mind spending more of her time with this child, as they had a very close bond. In fact, the educator enjoyed spending time with the child in this way. The closeness that they shared during these moments made the educator feel happy, and she believed the child felt happy, also. The educator started to consider other children in her room that she could not interact with in this way. These children did not elicit such warm and nurturing responses from the educator, in fact, it was the opposite. The educator would deliberately avoid close interactions with those children, as she could not provide the same level of genuine affection to those children. She wondered why that was?

This chapter presents findings that answer the four research questions (RQ). In accordance with a mixed methods design, findings from the quantitative data and qualitative data were merged and presented in a complimentary manner, which provides comprehensive insights and understandings of the research (Creswell, 2015). Table 4.1 illustrates the particular methods that were used to gather the data.
in order to answer the four research questions. Data analysis techniques are described in Chapter 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Research instruments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings? | ➢ Respect Reflect Relate Relationship Scale (RRRRS)  
➢ Semi-structured interview  
➢ Naturalistic observations |
| 2. What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings? | ➢ RRRRS  
➢ Semi-structured interviews  
➢ Naturalistic observations |
| 3. What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings? | ➢ Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing Scale (RRRWS)  
➢ Naturalistic observations |
| 4. What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings? | ➢ RRRRS  
➢ RRRWS |

The data from this research was collected from five Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in regional Victoria, Australia. Participants included 10 ECEC educators and 92 children. The findings of each question will be presented below.

4.1 RQ1 - What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?

4.1.1 Aim

Research question one aimed to provide a description of the quality of educator-child relationships by measuring the current levels of educator-child relationships from the sample. The Reflect Respect Relate Relationship Scale (RRRRS) (DECS, 2008) was used to measure the levels of educator-child relationships of 92
children aged 0 to 3 and their educator (n = 10), in their ECEC setting, positioned within a regional context.

The RRRRS focused on four domains: 1) responsiveness; 2) positive interactions; 3) quality verbal exchange; and 4) appropriateness. Within these domains, 45 indicators were observed and measured for each educator-child pairing. Six x 5-minute observations were undertaken on each child in the ECEC setting, separated by time (morning and afternoon) and place (inside and outside), meaning that a holistic description of the educator-child relationship was captured.

At the conclusion of the data collection stage, a mean score was calculated for each child using the RRRRS rating sheet, thereby giving the child a total score between 0 and 5. Table 4.2 describes the definition of each educator-child relationship level that could be attained.

### Table 4.2: RRRRS rating descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>No interactions with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non-supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restrictive, controlling, dominating interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social bids or cues for comfort go unnoticed or rejected, discounted,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>avoided or ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non-supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or</td>
<td>Functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-supportive</td>
<td>Interactions are routine, technical, mostly organisational or in response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to physical need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superficial contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with interruptions Educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>initiates contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not all signals are present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extremely supportive</td>
<td>Securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Invites and shares positive and reciprocal, sustained interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All signals present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.2 **Levels of educator-child relationships**

Individual levels of educator-child relationships for all children were combined in order to determine the mean educator-child relationship of the entire research sample (n = 92). Descriptive analysis was undertaken, which revealed that across the whole sample, the educator-child relationship level was moderate (M = 3.5, N = 92). Given that the minimum acceptable score for satisfactory relationships according to the RRRRS is 2.5, the results indicate that children aged 0 to 3 in the regional context of this research, on average, have a satisfactory relationship with their educator.

Satisfactory level relationships are defined as “neither supportive or unsupportive to mainly supportive” (DECS, 2008, p. 40) and are considered to be the lowest acceptable level that would support children’s basic needs. Further elaboration of a 2.5 mean level is that relationships are

... functional; interactions are routine, technical, mostly organisational or in response to physical need, superficial contact ... social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively; some intense, reciprocal interaction, but with interruptions; educator initiates contact; not all signs are present (DECS, 2008, p. 40).

This general description accurately describes the educator-child relationships most commonly observed amongst participants during the research period. Educators’ responses to children were mostly on a superficial level and were often in response to children’s basic needs. Most of these types of interactions between educators and children occurred during routine transition times (for example meal times/toileting/sleep time).
Findings also showed that there were children in the sample who experienced a much lower score, ranging from 1.8 to 2.5 (n = 6), which suggests that the relationship children have with their educator is “totally non-supportive” to “mainly non-supportive” (DECS, 2008, pg. 40). These relationships are described as

... negative, restricting, controlling, dominating interaction; social bids or cues for comfort go unnoticed or are rejected, discounted, avoided or ignored ... detached, delayed or brief interactions; minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection (DECS, 2008, p. 40).

In contrast, there was one child found to have very high relationship levels with their educator (n = 1), with a total score of 5. This relationship is considered “extremely supportive” (DECS, 2008, p. 40), and can be described as

... securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth; invites and shares positive reciprocal, sustained interaction (DECS, 2008, p. 40).

The educator-child relationship of this pairing was observed to be reciprocal and familiar, in that both educator and child contributed positively towards the relationship through mutual respect and responsiveness. For example, the educator would spontaneously migrate towards the child and provide him with a cuddle during the day, and also, the child would freely wander towards the educator and offer her with a cuddle during the day. This symbiotic relationship appeared to be fuelled by an acquainted connection, and actions of both parties were mirrored.

Further descriptive analysis of the data examined the four signals within the RRRRS: 1) responsiveness; 2) positive interactions; 3) quality verbal exchanges; and 4) appropriateness. Data analysis identified how the 4 signals contributed to higher and lower levels of educator-child relationships. The findings presented in Table 4.3
show that the responsiveness and appropriateness signals scored the highest, with positive interactions and quality verbal exchange scoring the lowest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RRRRS Signals</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.869</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Interaction</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Verbal Exchange</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.914</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.670</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRRRS Total score</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.649</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Signals and the total of the RRRRS are scored between 0 and 5

These results suggest that educator-child relationships are being positively influenced by educators’ responsiveness to children, and in appropriate practice.

Positive interactions and the quality of verbal exchange, however, are contributing to lower relationships levels.

Further analysis of these results were undertaken using data from the semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the results of the RRRRS.

4.1.2.1 Responsiveness Signal

Findings from the RRRRS, presented in Table 4.3, show that educators’ responsiveness was one of the highest scoring signal of the RRRRS (M = 4.45) influencing educator-child relationships. The semi-structured interview data and naturalistic observations that were taken throughout the data collection process provided a more in-depth understanding of the educator-child relationship levels. All educators (N = 10) articulated the need to be responsive to children in order to build
positive relationships. The following examples below provide typical responses of these perspectives

...Showing the children respect by listening to them. I think it’s important because if you don’t listen to them and respond to their needs they might dismiss you altogether... then we lose that connection (Emma, Setting 1)

...You need to respond to their needs... it’s the best way for the child and you to bond (Carla, Setting 3)

All seven indicators of the responsiveness signal were observed. These seven indicators included:

1. Receives reliable/predictable/consistent responses
2. Information from the child’s family, home, culture is used
3. Child has physical and emotional access to educator
4. Signals and cues are observed and listened to with attention and respect
5. Non-verbal and verbal; cues and social signals are reacted to sensitively and promptly, child’s lead is followed
6. Temperament, current mood and situation is considered respectfully
7. Is comforted quickly when distressed.

Each indicator is presented below according to the nature and frequency of their presence within the observed educator-child relationships.

4.1.2.1.1 Receives reliable/predictable/consistent responses

This indicator was measured by observing educators responses to children’s needs in the ECEC setting. For example, if a child was crying, did the educator respond in reliable and consistent ways – i.e. was the response the same every time? How quickly was the child responded to? Did the educator provide physical comfort? The researchers understanding of attachment behaviours informed these
observations. Furthermore, educators’ perspectives on providing predictable and reliable responsiveness to children contributed to the findings.

Educators’ perspective in relation to the importance of responding to children in reliable, predictable and consistent ways was discussed during the interviews. As one educator noted,

...if a child comes up to you and you either ignore or don’t respond, then they probably won’t come to you next time (Sophie, Centre 2)

In the naturalistic observation data, predictability of educators responses were measured through observing consistency in their approach to children’s needs and cues, and it was found that the predictability of educators’ responses to children were consistent. Educators’ response mechanisms appeared to be automatic and appropriate, however, these responses were predominantly care-taking in nature (i.e. feeding, putting children to sleep, nappy changing). For example, when children were distressed, educators would most often assess the child’s discomfort from a needs perspective – that is, did they need food/sleep/comfort? These care-taking responses often lacked sensitivity on an emotional level because they were focused on physical needs rather than emotion needs (i.e. not often did educators communicate with the child about their feelings). In the interviews, it was asserted by most educators (n = 6) that meeting children’s physical needs was the focus of their job; one example of this perspective is highlighted below:

... I know what the children want because I’ve built that relationship. I can tell the difference between their hungry cry and their pain cry ... I make sure I give them what they need when they need it (Renee, Setting 4).
This type of caretaking response, as a way to meet children’s physical needs, is indicative of a satisfactory relationship. In contrast, educator-child relationships were found to be higher when responsiveness went beyond meeting physical needs, and accomplished meeting the emotional needs of children. For example, when an educator spent prolonged periods comforting and talking to a distressed child on an emotional level, rather than just giving the child what they needed on a physical level.

Educators’ responses to children were found to be reliable, in that if a child needed to be tended to, for any number of reasons, educators would respond in developmentally appropriately ways. Appropriate practice was informed by the researchers understanding of child development and the NQS description of appropriate practice (ACECQA, 2013b). An example of this can be seen in Vignette 4.2

**Vignette 4.2 Response to child injury**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Child/ren: Daniel</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Sophie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel fell onto the floor while trying to carry a truck across the room. He began to cry. Sophie turned when she heard the cry, and promptly walked over to Daniel. Sophie: Oh, what happened? Are you ok? Sophie helped Daniel to his feet and examined his body. Daniel pointed to his knee, still crying, and Sophie rubbed his knee for several seconds. Sophie embraced Daniel, and Daniel slowly stopped crying.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The observation data revealed that when educators were observed dismissing a child, it was due to educators’ being distracted by transition times or engaged with other educators and children. Vignette 4.3 provides a typically observed example of this:
This Vignette shows a typical example of children’s attachment behaviours being ignored by the educator that was observed in all settings (N = 5).

Throughout the data collection period, educators’ responses to children varied. The most common practice involved educators responding to children’s basic physical needs (including food, sleep, toileting), however educators responding to attachment behaviours (such as clinging, following, mutual gaze) and emotional needs (such as physical comfort) were less common.

4.1.2.1.2 Information from the child’s family, home, culture is used

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) informs that a functional macrosystem sees the child’s home life and ECEC setting work together in a symbiotic manner. Strong links between children’s home and their ECEC setting is said to be a determinant of quality (Rouse, 2012a), and was observed in the current study to determine the influence of this factor on educator-child relationships.

Information about the child’s family and home being incorporated in the settings was evident in all educators’ (N = 10) practice across all settings (N = 5). All educators (N = 10) communicated during the interviews that the educator-parent
relationship enabled educators to learn more about the child’s home life, and that this supported their relationships with children. For example, one educator stated that

... (parents) tell us what we need to know to make sure we meet the needs of the children and make them feel connected, and that helps us build the relationship (Carla, Setting 3)

Indications of children’s home life being included in the ECEC settings were found on the walls (child family photos visible), within children’s portfolios (parental and home information) and planning folders (family activity information). Educators (N = 10) articulated that it was important for them to incorporate children’s home life into the ECEC setting. One educator noted that

... We do what we can to make this place feel like home to children ... it helps to make them feel comfortable being here with us (Kim, Setting 1).

Evidence of collaboration between the ECEC setting and home was visible in all ECEC settings. For example, each of the five settings in the current study contained specific visual instructions regarding children’s eating and sleeping patterns, which educators described as being informed by parents. These informed documents were presented in different ways (on the wall, inside cupboards or inside folders) depending on the setting and room, however the information provided was similar across all settings and included the name of child, sleep habits and comforters for rest periods. Examples of these documents this can be seen in Figures 4.1 and Figure 4.2:
These visual representations of children’s individual needs provided casual educators (i.e. educators who relieved permanent educators for lunch breaks, sick days and so forth) to be able to appropriately respond to children’s needs in the ECEC setting, and ensured that important information, like child allergies, was considered. The individual documentation also demonstrated that children’s home habits, such as sleeping with comforters, were included in the ECEC setting.

Evidence of embracing children’s culture was not apparent across all settings. Most settings ($n = 3$) had evidence of multi-cultural activities through books, posters and in some cases, dramatic play and activity spaces, however it was not directly reflective of the culture of the children in the settings. Children of different cultures were not strongly represented in the sample of children in the current study, suggesting that culturally relevant information was most commonly in the form of an Australian context.

4.1.2.1.3 Child has physical and emotional access to educator

Chapter 2 described the importance of educators being physical and emotionally available for children, in order to build positive educator-child
relationships, and this was measured in the current study. The RRRRS data revealed that educators’ physical presence in the room was one of the lower scoring indicators of responsiveness, and this was supported by the data obtained from observations in naturalistic settings and the interview data. Two educators described the impact educators’ absence has on children in the ECEC setting

...I notice that some of the children get really upset when that person in their room isn’t there. It’s one of the worst parts (Julie, Centre 2)

... Workers in and out all the time is unsettling for children. They don’t know if they are safe (Valarie, Setting 3)

While educators were very clear with their views on the importance of educators’ physical presence in the room, the naturalistic observations shed a different light on the issue. All educators (N = 10) would leave the room at least three times per day, 1) morning tea break, 2) lunch break, 3) afternoon tea break. However, all educators in the study were also found to leave the room more frequently than three times per day. It was found that educators would leave the room for extended periods (longer than 10-minutes) either doing administrative tasks (such as answering phones or undertaking curriculum planning), housekeeping duties (taking out washing, collecting materials from store rooms) or for collaborative reasons (talking amongst one another). These absences resulted in children having no access to that educators’ during those periods of time.

Two educators in particular (Karen from Setting 2 and Carla from Setting 3) would spend very little time in the room with children, often leaving to attend ‘housekeeping’ duties, such as looking for resources within the setting, collecting food, checking washing and conferring with other staff members in different rooms.
One observation, conducted in the morning, found the educator to be frequently absent, as illustrated in Vignette 4.4.

**Vignette 4.4 Educator absence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Child/ren: N/A</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Karen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Karen left the room to find coloured paper for the children – returned 35 minutes later
- Karen left the room to collect the morning tea trolley – returned 15 minutes later
- Karen left the room to speak to the co-ordinator – returned 30 minutes later

The type of frequent absences illustrated in Vignette 4.4 meant that during some observation times for the RRRRS, and naturalistic observations, educators were not physically accessible to children. Some children \((n = 32)\) would demonstrate attachment behaviours during educators’ departures to re-establish proximity to their educator, including crying and following the educator when she would leave for breaks, as seen in Vignette 4.5.

**Vignette 4.5 Educator tea-break**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 4</th>
<th>Child/ren: Noah</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Renee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Renee had to leave the room for her tea break. Noah followed her to the door with his arms outstretched and sobbed. Renee bent down to Noah Renee: I’ll be right back, Noah. Renee stood and walked out the door. Noah put his hands on the closed door and cried. Noah continued to cry for several minutes before reengaging in the environment.

This Vignette illustrates behaviours that were very common in the birth to 2 years group when educators would leave the room, and did not discriminate between levels of educator-child relationships (i.e. attachment behaviours were exhibited by children with both high and low relationship levels). In some instances,
children would recover quickly from this departure, and other instances saw children
remain upset until the educator returned. This pattern of behaviour evident during
observations was discussed during the interviews

... There are some children who are very dependent on us, or at least one of
us. I know when I leave for lunch or if I’m sick, that a few children will not be
happy because I’m not there (Valarie, Setting 3).

Attachment behaviours exhibited by children were responded to in various
ways – sometimes dismissive, sometimes nurturing. It was mentioned during the
interviews that children’s needs could not always be met as quickly as educators
would like, with one educator noting that

... even when they cry or need us, sometimes we can’t respond right away
because we’re busy with another child. I think that is hard for them when
they’re so little, and probably hurts the relationship a bit (Nina, Setting 5)

Educators, when present, were observed as being a secure base for most
children, in that educators were available and responsive when children would
return to them for support or encouragement, which supported children’s
exploration in the environment. Children were observed returning to educators for
both support when distressed, and to share in delight and joy.

Emotional availability of the educators was recorded in the RRRRS as
educators’ ability to share in emotional interactions and responses with children. For
example, when children had more emotional access to their educator, the educator
was observed providing emotionally responsive practice by addressing the child’s
feelings. When educators were seen to be available and respond on an emotional
level to a child, later analysis revealed that the level of that educator-child
relationship between that pair was higher; an example of this is illustrated in

Vignette 4.6.

Vignette 4.6 Educator-child cuddles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Rachel</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 4.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rachel crawled over to Kim, who was sitting on the floor reading a book to a small group of children. Kim looked at Rachel approaching and opened her arms. Rachel crawled up onto Kim’s knee.

**Kim:** Is it cuddle time, Rachel?

Kim placed Kim into her lap and continued to read the book to the small group of children.

These findings demonstrate that when educators were emotionally, not merely physically available to children that educator-child relationships were supported, as determined by the child’s behaviours to educators’ responsiveness, noted in the RRRRS.

### 4.1.2.1.4 Signals and cues are observed and listened to with attention and respect

Children from birth to 3 years old rely on communicating their needs to adults through signals and cues (i.e. physical appearance, gestures, attachment behaviours), and educators ability to observe and appropriately respond to said signals and cues inform the quality of their responsiveness. Naturalistic observations revealed that educators responded to children’s signals and cues throughout the day. These signals and cues were responded to respectfully, albeit in passing or superficially. For example, educators might say “it’s ok” to a child who was crying, without attempting to address the emotional state of the child by asking why they were upset, or providing emotional support to overcome the distress. This practice is superficial in nature, as the educator does respond to the child’s distress signal,
however does not delve into the child’s emotional needs or provide support to regulate their emotions.

Similar to findings from other responsiveness indicators (see 4.2.31, Vignette 4.3), when educators were engaged in transition duties, or were distracted by other educators, they were less likely to give undivided attention to children’s signals. Vignette 4.7 illustrates a typical occurrence amongst all educators, in that when educators were distracted, they were less able to respond to children.

**Vignette 4.7 Educators’ conversation and distractions**

| Setting: 4 | Child/ren: Linda | RRRRS Level: 2.6 |
| Time: AM | Educator: Kate |
| Kate and another educator discussed taking the children outside for lunch. Linda approached Kate with her shoe. **Linda:** My shoe (holding out her shoe to (Kate) Kate continued to speak with the educator, and did not respond to Linda. **Linda:** Kate (Linda held out her shoe again). Kate looked down at Linda and took the shoe out of her hand, then continued to speak to the other educator. Linda waited by Kate’s side. It was several minutes before Kate stopped talking with the educator. She then helped Linda put on her shoe. |

Vignette 4.7 illustrated educators distracted in adult conversation, however other common distractions that interrupted educators ability to respond to children’s signals included transition times, leaving the room and when children would arrive or depart form the ECEC setting. During these times, educators’ concentration on individual children was limited, and therefore focused attention could not be given to children.

When educators were engaged in sustained interactions with individual children, their ability to respond to the child’s signals and cues increased due to the educators’ attention being focused on the individual child. A typical example of this
was observed during routine transition times, when educators were focusing on one child at a time during toileting and sleep times. Routine transition times facilitated one on one interactions between children and educators, however did disrupt sustained play interactions.

Throughout the observation data, a high level of attention and sustained play interactions were most often noted right after meal times, after educators had packed away food and would sit with children at tables or on the floor for a brief period (approximately 20-minutes). An example of this can be seen in Vignette 4.8.

### Vignette 4.8 Toilet time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 5</th>
<th>Child/ren: Megan</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 2.7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Nina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kim and Megan were building sandcastles in the sandpit.

**Megan:** Wees

**Nina:** You have to do a wee, Megan?

**Megan:** Wees

**Nina:** Come on then, lets go to the toilet

Nina stood up from the sandpit and held Megan’s hand as they walked to the toilet together

The above Vignette demonstrates that when educators are engaged with children, they were in a better position to respond to children’s signals quickly, and with focused attention.

4.1.2.1.5 **Non-verbal and verbal cues and social signals (eye contact, waving, reaching, smiles, cries) are reacted to sensitively and promptly, child’s lead is followed**

Children in the birth to 3 years age group have limited verbal skills, and so rely heavily on non-verbal cues and social bids (for example, eye contact, smiling, gazing, pointing). Educators must be able to comprehend what children are trying to
communicate when they employ these non-verbal prompts, as this ensures children’s physical and emotional needs are being appropriately responded to (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Across the sample, educators were found to understand and respond to children’s non-verbal cues – this was particularly evident in the birth to 2 years group. Child interactions with others in this age group were prompted by non-verbal cues, given the verbal communication skills of the age group are limited. Non-verbal cues, including waving, pointing, smiling, laughing and reaching (i.e., attachment behaviours), were exhibited by all children (N = 92), and educators typically responded in kind. For example, when a child would smile at their educator, the educator would smile back. Responses to children’s non-verbal cues relied on educators’ attention, for when educators did not notice the non-verbal cues, they were not responded to at all. In the interview, one educator described the importance of responding to non-verbal cues, stating that

...They can’t always tell us what they are feeling and so us being responsive is so important (Emma, Setting 1)

Conversely, one educator stated that children must wait for educators to respond to their needs, suggesting that responding to children’s needs ‘promptly’ is not always possible for educators.

... if a child’s upset they can wait a few minutes while I finish doing a nappy or something (Karen, Setting 2)

In the 2 to 3 years age group, verbal cues were more commonly found, and observations revealed that educators responded using developmentally appropriate language (basic and simple wording). Humour was also observed more often in the 2
to 3 years age group, in the form of jokes and playful banter, initiated by either the child or educator. When children initiated humour, such as showing the educator something funny, the educator would join in with laughter. An example of this can be seen in Vignette 4.9.

**Vignette 4.9 Hairdressers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Kathy &amp; Andrea</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Kathy): 3.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td>RRRRS Level (Andrea): 4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kim was sitting on the chair, while Kathy and Andrea used the hairdressing props to do her hair.

**Andrea:** You’re getting pink hair! (laughing)

**Kim:** What? Pink hair? Oh my I am going to look very funny, aren’t I? How can I go to the shops with pink hair?

**Andrea:** With blue spots (laughing)

**Kim:** Oh no, people will think I’m a clown!

Kim, Andrea and Kathy laughed together.

This Vignette provides a typical example throughout the observations of humour being shared amongst children and educators. Educators’ ability to respond to humour was of higher quality when educators were already engaged in interactions with children, rather than from spontaneous interactions. For example, if an educator was performing a housekeeping duty such as cleaning paint pots, a child showing her something humorous was met with superficial acknowledgement, such as “great” or “wow”, whereas if the educator was interacting one-on-one with a child, and the child showed her something humorous, the educator would extend the humorous encounter with playful banter and laughter.

While for the most part, educators were able to identify and respond appropriately to children’s verbal and non-verbal cues, this was not always the case. One such example was when an educator (Karen, Setting 2) was observed mimicking a child’s verbal cues, to which another educator was laughing. This was done in a
‘mocking’ spirit, where a distressed child was repeating the word “mum”, shortly after being dropped off at the ECEC setting. The educator stared at the child and repeated the word “mum, mum” in a taunting tone. The child remained distressed throughout this interaction, and eventually walked away from the educator. The educator justified this practice to her colleague by saying that the child is always “sooky” after drop off, and that she does not respond or pay him any attention anymore. In this example, the child was not responded to appropriately, respectfully or sensitively, and it was later found that the educator-child relationship level of this child was very low, at 1.8. It is important to note, however, that this practice was not found to be common across the rest of the participants in this research project.

4.1.2.1.6 Temperament, current mood and situation is considered respectfully

This indicator refers to educators’ ability to firstly identify and then respond appropriately to children’s moods in varying situations, predicated on an understanding of the child’s temperament. The temperament of each child in the study appeared to be well understood by the educators on a basic level; children were labelled as ‘naughty’ and ‘sooky’ or ‘easy’ and ‘happy’. Depending on the label the child had been given by the educator, corresponding interactions were found in the observations. For example, those children who were labelled as ‘naughty’ or ‘sooky’ would often experience harsher responses from educators, while children labelled as ‘easy’ or ‘happy’ would more often receive positive responses from educators. All educators (N = 10) referred to children’s temperament during interviews, as illustrated by the following two examples

... You learn what (children) are like pretty quickly ... the ones who have that easy going temperament are just easier to deal with ... there is less
frustration and that comes through when you’re dealing with them (Carla, Setting 3).

... Their temperament guides how we treat them to begin with (Renee, Setting 4).

Educators from all ECEC settings (N = 5) referred to children’s temperament during interviews, and even though they described temperament as being an important factor in the development of educator-child relationships, no setting adopted the practice of matching educator and child temperament, as seen in a goodness-of-fit approach (Churchill, 2003; Chess & Thomas, 2012), where educators and children are paired based on complimentary temperament and personality traits. Rather, the recognition that children would prefer one educator to another was acknowledged, as seen in the example below

...The child becomes attracted to the educator that responds to them in the way they like. So it can be a case that the child won’t bond with one of us but will have a strong bond with the other (Renee, Setting 4)

Overall, it was noted during the observations that those children who had received a less desirable label by their educator (such as ‘sooky’ or ‘naughty’, ) were less likely to receive warm and responsive interactions, whereas those children who received positive reflections of their temperament (such as ‘good’ or ‘nice’) would receive more genuine responses from educators.

While the current study did not aim to investigate children’s temperament type, or the educators’, it was still observed and discussed during the interviews and identified as a factor that influences educator-child relationships, and is therefore presented in more detail in section 4.2.3.2.1.
4.1.2.1.7  *Is comforted quickly when distressed*

Child distress was noted in the RRRRS through observations of children’s internalised and externalised behaviours, including crying, withdrawal, aggression and unresponsiveness. In the birth to 3-year old age group, when children were observed as being distressed, educators’ responses were swift and nurturing, and supported children’s recovery from distressing situations. These types of responses would be in the form of a soothing discussion, physical comfort or redirection, as seen in Vignette 4.10.

**Vignette 4.10 Helpful and comforting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 3</th>
<th>Child/ren: Luke</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Valarie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valarie was setting the table outside, when Luke started crying from the sandpit. Valarie turned to look at Luke, and started walking over to him at a brisk pace.

**Valarie:** Are you ok? What’s wrong, Luke?

Luke pointed to his foot, which was stuck in a bucket, and continued to cry.

**Valarie:** Oh I see, let me help you.

Valarie sat next to Luke and worked on getting his foot out of the bucket. Once Luke’s foot was loose, she held it in her hand and examined it. She then lifted him onto her knee. Valarie wrapped her arms around him, and started to sway from side to side.

**Valarie:** Shhh, its ok now, we got it out of the bucket. You’re going to be ok


This example illustrates a quick and positive response to a child’s distress that supported educator-child relationships. There were some instances where a child was distressed and they were not comforted, as seen in Vignette 4.11.
Vignette 4.11 Left crying in the highchair

| Setting: 4 | Child/ren: Billy | RRRRS Level: 2.9 |
| Time: PM | Educator: Renee |

Billy sat in highchair and cried. Renee continued to clean the table, leaving Billy in the highchair. Billy became more distressed and continued to cry. It was several minutes before Renee removed Billy from the highchair, after which she placed him on the floor, where he continued to cry.

Not responding to children’s distress appeared to be intentional practice, and was described by some educators’ in the interviews as an intentional teaching strategy designed to meet the individual needs of each child. For example, one educator stated that

... We have a plan for each child. Some we respond to in certain ways because that’s what works for that child, and some we respond to in other ways. If a child is too demanding or needy all the time we will make them wait a bit longer before we go to them, so they learn patience (Julie, Setting 1).

The educators’ ability to respond to children’s distress appeared to be influenced by the demands of the room. For example, during hectic routine transition times, educators were less able to quickly respond to children’s distress due to preoccupation with tasks, and so would adopt superficial responses, such as calling out “you’re ok” to soothe a crying child. Another example of superficial responses to distress is illustrated in in Vignette 4.12.

Vignette 4.12 Superficial conflict support

| Setting: 3 | Child/ren: Phil & Dean | RRRRS Level (Phil): 2.1 |
| Time: PM | Educator: Carla | RRRRS Level (Dean): 2.6 |

Phil and Dean were both trying to take possession on the block hammer. Dean pulled the hammer out of Phil’s hands, and walked away. Phil screamed and started to cry. Carla looked over from the table she was setting up for afternoon tea.

**Carla:** It’s ok Phil, go and find another hammer.
Carla continued to set the table for afternoon tea
**Phil:** Its mine!
Phil continued to cry
**Carla:** Phil, you don’t need to cry. There is another hammer over there
Carla pointed to a hammer on the floor, and continued to set the table. Phil walked away, sobbing.

Educators engaged in more meaningful responses when they were not distracted by routine or transition times, or when the room was not as busy (for example, if several children were asleep). This was articulated in the interviews, with one educator noting that

... So much goes on during the day. We get distracted sometimes, I guess when that happens we can’t be as helpful ... there’s not much we can do to change that (Kate, Setting 4).

4.1.2.1.8 **Summary of responsiveness**

Overall, educators responded appropriately to children physical needs. This level of responsiveness, as reported in the RRRRS scale (M = 4.45), was predominantly evident during routine transition times (i.e., feeding, toileting and sleep times), as well as when a child was hurt or distressed. Educators were found to be less responsive to children’s emotional needs, and play initiations (evidence of which is presented in section 4.2.4).

When educators were observed to be non-responsive to children, this was typically due to other distractions in the room. For example, routine transition times (moving from meal times to sleep times, or moving indoors to outdoors) caused the most distraction for educators, and during these times they were not as quick to respond to children. Furthermore, educators were observed as less responsive to children when they were engaged in collegial conversation. These conversations
tended to be a mixture of work related discussion and personal related matters. Finally, educators were less responsive to children when they were performing duties within the room (such as cleaning, making beds, preparing meals) and when educators left the rooms for various reasons (including lunch breaks), thereby making themselves physically unavailable to children.

Findings from the observations showed that educators would be more responsive to some children than others, and this tended to result in higher RRRRS levels. For example, Karen from Setting 1 was observed several times exhibiting non-responsive behaviours towards Sam (for example see 4.2.3.6, Vignette 4.18 and Vignette 4.20). Karen and Sam’s relationship level was found to be very low in the RRRRS (M = 1.8). However, Karen would display prompt and appropriate responsiveness towards Archie, and this relationship level was found to be high in the RRRRS (M = 4.2). These examples are indicative of the educator-child sample (N = 92), in which educators would provide more meaningful responses to children later found to have a high educator-child relationship level.

4.1.2.2 Positive interactions signal

The positive interaction signal refers to educators and children interacting in sustained play, incorporating warmth and genuine care. Positive interactions were found to be one of the lowest scoring signals of educator-child relationships in the RRRRS (M = 2.97). Furthermore, naturalistic observations revealed that educator-child interactions were superficial and brief in nature, occurring only sporadically and often interrupted by routine transition times (for example, moving from play times to meal times). However, during the interviews, when educators were asked “what is the most important factor of an educator-child relationship”, several educators (n =
4) identified positive interactions as the most important factor, as illustrated in the examples below

... Warm, friendly, caring interactions (Carla, Setting 3)

... Positive interactions (Renee, Setting 4)

A total of 13 indicators inform the positive interactions signals, through observations of the child and educator in the ECEC setting, including

1. Is engaged in interactive play with educator
2. Communication towards child is happy, respectful tone (soothing/caring, not harsh, controlling, irritated
3. Welcoming gestures and eye contact (smiles, vocalisations) are directed towards the child
4. Warmth and affected are shared with the child
5. Active interest is taken in the child’s activity
6. Is involved with the educator 1:1
7. Is given encouragement through support and acknowledgment of effort and process (rather than products or attributes)
8. Has access to models and help for peaceful resolution of conflicts
9. Receives expressions of positive feelings
10. Positive feelings are directed towards child
11. Questions and comments of interest to the child are made
12. Child’s social bids are extended/elaborated

Each of the 13 indicators of positive interactions is reported on according to the quality and frequency of the presence of educator-child interactions, to provide more insight into this aspect of educator-child relationships.
4.1.2.2.1 *Is engaged in interactive play with educator*

Children and educators involved in interactive play together in the ECEC setting inform the quality of positive interactions. Most educators (n = 8) commented that positive interactions with children strengthened their relationships, and allowed for strong relationships to develop, forged by these interactions. Enjoyable experiences shared between the educator and child in play were described as the focus of these positive interactions, for example

...Children need to be able to laugh with you, and have fun, play games
(Emma, Setting 1)

Despite educators articulating the importance of positive interactions with children on the development of relationships, it was found that educators and children did not interact for great lengths of time, especially in play. At best, brief play interactions were noted occasionally, and were usually initiated by the child. These play interactions were defined as moments where educator and child were engaged in sustained and focused interactions together, either participating in room activities or playful conversations, such as singing or storytelling.

During data collection, educators were observed engaging in housekeeping (i.e., cleaning, preparing for sleep time) and routine transition times (i.e. moving children from toileting to sleep), which limited their ability to interact with each child on an individual level. Rather, a ‘supervision’ or ‘monitoring’ approach made up educator-child interactions, particularly during outdoor times, as illustrated in Vignette 4.13.
Vignette 4.13 Social sandpit play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Children: Caleb, Tony &amp; Don</th>
<th>Educator: Nina</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Caleb): 2.1</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Tony): 3.1</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Don): 3.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Children were outside playing in the yard. Caleb, Tony and Don were playing in the sandpit. They were playing with the buckets, shovels and plastic animals. Nina walked over to the sandpit and observed the boys playing.

**Don:** Nina, we need dinosaurs (he stood up from the sand)

**Nina:** Ok, I will go and get you some

Nina walked into the storage shed, Don, Tony and Caleb followed her. They watched as she looked for some dinosaurs.

**Caleb:** That one! (He pointed to a large tub)

Nina opened the tub and pulled out dinosaurs, handing one each to the boys.

**Nina:** There you go

**Tony:** I want a bigger one

**Nina:** The one you have is big, go and play in the sandpit with them

Tony left to join Caleb and Don back in the sandpit. Nina walked away.

In this example, it is evident that children’s play prompts are being responded to, however on this superficial level the educator did not attempt to engage or extend play opportunities with children; this was typical practice of all educators (N = 10).

When educators were observed playing with children, the interactions tended to be quite short, or in a group environment. These brief play interactions would occur inside, in-between transition periods (for example, after nappy changes, but before sleep). In these cases, educators would be positioned inside the rooms, usually seated on the floor or at a table. Children would initiate the play by bringing toys or objects to the educator, or by calling the educator to their play space. Typically, the educator would follow the child’s lead for several minutes, before moving on to another child, or a transition duty, or to engage in discussion with other educators. An example of this is shown in Vignette 4.14.
Vignette 4.14 Brief educator-child playtime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 3</th>
<th>Children: Bob &amp; Daniel</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Bob): 4.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Sophie</td>
<td>RRRRS Level (Daniel): 3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sophie sat on the car mat with Bob and Daniel. Daniel and Bob were using the blocks to build a car ramp.

**Daniel:** It’s big now, watch this!
Daniel pushed the toy car up the ramp

**Sophie:** Wow! That went really far. Could you make it higher? It might go further.

**Bob:** Yeah!
Daniel and Bob started to work on the ramp by adding more blocks. Sophie stood up

**Sophie:** Good job, guys
Sophie walked over to two other children at the art easel. Bob and Daniel watched her walk away, then continued to build their ramp.

The above example represents the typical amount of time when educators spent playing with children, which when observed was lasted between 2 to 5 minutes.

One educator described the difficulty of finding time to engage in sustained play with children in the ECEC setting, and that the limited time educators spend in play interactions with children was not a desirable, or intentional, teaching practice.

As one educator noted

... If I had my way I would do nothing but play with the children all day, but we can’t. We have to change nappies, and cleaning, and feed them, and bookwork ... we don’t get to just play with them as much as we’d like to (Kim, Setting 1).

4.1.2.2 Communication towards the child has a happy, respectful tone (soothing, caring, not harsh, controlling, irritated).

Happy, respectful and caring communication between children and educators is an indicator is positive interactions that inform quality relationships.

Communication between educator and child occurred daily in the ECEC settings, and
typically was observed to be respectful and happy. One educator in particular, Kim from Setting 1, demonstrated high quality communication skills at all times. Kim’s communication with children was observed as soothing, age appropriate, respectful and patient, even during behaviour guidance interactions (where children’s undesirable behaviour required intervention). An example of this educators' communication with children can be seen in Vignette 4.15.

### Vignette 4.15 Behaviour guidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Children: Nathan</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nathan tipped some water on the table from his cup, and started splashing the water with his palm. Kim walked over to Nathan, and knelt down to his level, speaking in a slow, soothing tone.

**Kim:** Nathan, can you see that when you are splashing the water on the table, you are getting your friends all wet? (pointing at other children). I know it is fun to play with water, but I think we should do that after we eat. How about we wipe this water up so that we can finish our snack, then we can go outside and fill up a water trough, if you would like to play with water. Nathan allowed Kim to wipe away the water, and continued to eat his afternoon tea. Once they went outside, Kim followed through with providing Nathan with a water trough to play in.

The above example was often evident during interactions with this educator and children. Kim was working with children aged 2 to 3 year room, and even when children could not reciprocate with verbal responses, she would still communicate verbally with children and respond to their non-verbal cues.

All educators (N = 10) in the current study were observed adopting positive communication techniques, where happy and respectful language was used to converse with children. However, some educators (n = 4) were prone to use harsher tones and words with children at times, as seen in Vignette 4.16.
Sally and Phillip were drawing on the wall with crayons. Cara walked over and took the crayons out of their hands, and stood over the children while speaking in a loud, harsh tone.

**Cara:** You know that you cannot draw on our walls! You need to listen to what Cara tells you, and use the crayons on the paper only. Now we have to clean it up, so go and get a face washer form the tub and start wiping this off. Now! Phillip and Sally slowly walked over to the face washer tub and each took a face washer. They walked over to the wall and started to wash it.

It was observed that when educators raised their voice, or used harsh tones when directing children, some children (n = 5) would become withdrawn (for example, retreating to solitude), and other children (n = 8) would become visibly upset (for example, crying). These types of harsh communication examples would typically occur during busy periods of the day, such as during routine transition times (particularly while preparing for sleep times), where educators appeared to be consumed with the demands of the room.

There were also instances when educators would have their back turned towards children while in conversation with them, as well as instances when educators would deliberately walk away and ignore a child’s attempt to communicate, illustrated in Vignette 4.17.

**Vignette 4.17 Avoiding attachment behaviours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Children: Sam</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 1.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Karen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sam walked up to Karen while she was putting music on at the bench. Sam reached for her leg and tapped her. Karen did not respond. Sam called to her, sobbing. Karen walked away from Sam, across the room.
These interactions typically occurred when the educator was distracted with routine transition times or other duties. When educator-child relationships were found to be unsatisfactory (n = 6), that is scoring below 2.5 (DECS, 2008), communication towards the child was observed as harsh and irritated. For example, the educator from the above example described feelings of irritation with certain children during the interview

... I know I lose my patience really quickly with some of them, and I think that’s just because of their whining ... it's irritating to deal with hundreds of times a day. If I didn’t walk away I would end up yelling at them (Karen, Setting 2).

Across the sample, educators were observed communicating with one another more so than with children. Collegial communication occurred frequently throughout the day, and was related to both professional and personal matters, and was noted as a significant distraction that interrupted opportunities for educator-child interactions.

4.1.2.2.3 Welcoming gestures and eye contact (smiles, vocalisations) are directed towards the child

Educators directing welcoming gestures and eye contact towards children during the day denote positive interactions. Educators in the sample (N = 10) demonstrated appropriateness in their welcoming gestures to children at times, noted in the RRRRS. During the interviews, one educator discussed her training in regards to maintaining eye contact with children, stating

... I remember when I was doing my Diploma, the teacher really drilled into us “you should always be down on the children’s level and look them in the eye
when you talk to them”. I always remembered that, so I always get down to their level when I talk to them (Nina, Setting 5).

Educators would encourage children attempts to initiate interactions, and maintain eye contact during these exchanges, however on two occasions educators were observed rolling their eyes at the child during one on one interactions.

4.1.2.2.4  *Warmth and affection are shared with the child*

Warmth and affection are evident in educators nurturing interactions with children, such as caring embraces and tender responses. Naturalistic observations revealed warmth and affection was occurring between children and their educator, typically in the form of embraces, nurturing touch and smiles. These interactions showed educators expressing positive feelings towards the child, and these were reciprocated by the child, as seen in Vignette 4.18.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.18 Nurturing embrace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time:</strong> AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Valarie:** Come here you gorgeous girl (arms outstretched towards Mary)
Mary walked over to Valarie; both were smiling. When Mary was within arm’s reach of Valarie, Valarie wrapped her arms around Mary and embraced her, swaying Mary from side to side.

**Valarie:** You’re just the best cuddler!
Mary and Valarie were smiling as they embraced.

During the interviews, this level of affection was described as essential for bonding. The following comment represents typical responses from educators during the interviews

... You have to show them affection all the time, with big hugs and hand holding and even kisses. I know that’s a bit frowned upon now, but I give them kisses every day. It strengthens our bond (Kim, Setting 1)
... I love a cuddle with the little ones. It feels so good to just give them a big squeeze, and they love it, too (Renee, Setting 4)

Some children (n = 6) did not receive this type of affection from their educator, as reflected in the low scoring signal of positive interactions (see Table 4.3), and exampled by Vignette 4.19.

Vignette 4.19 Attachment behaviour denied

<p>| Setting: 2 | Children: Sam | RRRRS Level: 1.8 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time: AM</th>
<th>Educator: Karen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam was walking around the outside yard, holding a blanket and whimpering. Karen was talking to another educator near the swings. Karen looked in Sam’s direction three separate times, but did not go to him. Sam started to walk towards Karen. When he reached her, he put his arms up. Karen looked down at Sam. Karen: What’s wrong? Sam: (arms outreached towards Karen. Makes a whimpering sound) Karen: You need to find something to do Karen nudged Sam from behind towards the sandpit, and then walked away in the other direction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This example demonstrates that for some children (n = 6), educators’ responses to attachment behaviours were quite negative in nature, with social bids often ignored, avoided or rejected, and no warmth or affection given to the child.

4.1.2.2.5 Active interest is taken in the child’s activity

When educators take an active interest in the child’s activity, they are engaged with the child, ask questions and extend play. Throughout the observation periods, it became evident that there were times during the day where educators were in a better position to take an active interest in children’s activities. When educators were engaged in ‘transition periods’, for example toileting/sleep times/meal times/cleaning, they were less likely to show interest in the child’s
activity through meaningful interactions. Vignette 4.20 illustrates one typical example that was captured through observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.20 Transition time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> 4 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children:</strong> Jasmine &amp; Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educator:</strong> Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RRRRS Level (Adam):</strong> 1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RRRHS Level (Jasmine):</strong> 3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Kate:** Ok everyone, time to pack up for lunch
Kate walked around the room and prompted the children to pack up the areas they were playing in. She walked over to the arts and craft table, where two children were still drawing.

**Jasmine:** Mines a dog (she told Kate, referring to her drawing)
Kate did not respond.

**Adam:** Kate, look (Adam held up his drawing to show Kate)

**Kate:** That’s beautiful, Adam (momentarily looks at Adam’s drawing. Adam continues to draw). I said to pack up now, come on (Kate walked away from the arts and craft table).

This observation demonstrates the superficial contact occurring between educator and child. One of the child’s cues was ignored, and one was responded to, however Kate’s response was merely praising the child on a superficial level, rather than using authentic feedback (i.e. acknowledging the child’s specifics efforts and success through detailed verbal feedback) to make the interaction more meaningful in order to support the educator-child relationship.

When educators were observed taking an interest in children’ activity, one on one interactions were prolonged. One such example can be seen in Vignette 4.21.
The above example showed the educator taking a genuine interest in the children’s activity, and this interaction occurred during indoor/outdoor play time, where there were only three other children in the room. As mentioned previously, it was less likely that educators would take interest in children’s activities when the room was busier, or when educators were engaged in transition periods.

4.1.2.2.6 Is involved with the educator one-on-one

One on one interactions between children and educators depict focused attention on one another, enabling genuine and meaningful collaboration. As previously mentioned, moments of one on one interaction between educators and children were rarely observed during the data collection process, and when they were observed they were quite brief. Although one on one interactions between educator and children were limited, educators did describe their desire for this practice during the interviews

... I think the best part of the day for relationship building is when you have some one on one time with the children. Like, when most of them sleep at
the same time we might only have one or two awake, and we can really be there for them (Kim, Setting 1).

This example demonstrates that while educators do want this one on one time with children, it is difficult to achieve unless there are less distractions in the room (for example, routine transition times/number of children in the room). The naturalistic observations supported this perception illustrated in this comment, with one on one interactions observed when there were fewer children in the room (indoor/outdoor play time), or when most children were sleeping (scattered sleeping routines allowed for only a few children to be awake at some periods).

When one on one interactions were observed, the were unhurried and demonstrated mutual interest in one another, For example, educators were more likely to be in close physical proximity when engaged in one on one activities, and converse more with the child, sharing in humour and interest, as illustrated in Vignette 4.22.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.22 One-on-one interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above example illustrates that educators were able to maintain one-on-one interactions with children during quiet periods. These types of interactions tended to last longer when there were fewer children in the room.

In general, educators were observed interacting with several children at once in group times. One educator articulated the necessity of group interactions during the interview

... as much as we would love to spend heaps of time with each child, we just can’t. That’s the nature of this kind of setting. It’s not possible for us to give each of them the same amount of attention as they’d get at home with their mum and dad (Julie, Setting 2)

Educators also noted that one on one interactions supported their relationships with children, with one educator stating

... Of course the more time we spend with the children, the better our relationships are with them because you know them better (Carla, Setting 3).

The concept of spending time with children was a concurrent theme throughout the interviews, and is presented in more detail in section 4.3.3.1.1.

4.1.2.2.7 Is given encouragement through support and acknowledgement of effort and processes (rather than products or attributes).

Educators are encouraged to support and acknowledge children’s efforts and successes through authentic feedback, rather than superficial praise of product or attributes. By focusing on children’s processes rather than products support children’s autonomy and self-worth (Porter, 2016). Evidence of educators (N = 10) providing encouragement and support towards children was evident with the majority of children (n = 86). Typically, educators would all encourage autonomy and
independence by encouraging children to do things for themselves, when possible. For example, when children would line up to wash their hands for lunch, educators would stand back for the most part, and use words to encourage children to wash their own hands. Similarly, if children required assistance, such as getting a comforter to sleep with or self-serving at meal times, educators would encourage children to be autonomous, with common phrases along the lines of “you can pour that all by yourself” or “I’ll wait here while you get that from your bag”. Educators (N = 10) did not discuss this approach during interviews, however it was observed in the natural setting on a daily basis.

Naturalistic observations revealed that educators would typically provide authentic feedback to children, articulating the child’s efforts in meaningful ways, however this practiced was diminished during hectic routine transition times. For example, when educators were cleaning the room, their responses to children’s efforts tended to be superficial, such as saying “good job” or “keep going” when children looked to educators for support. This practice tended to be common traits of individual educators pedagogy. For example, Kim (Setting 1), Sophie (Setting 2), Renee (Setting 4) and Nina were consistently found to give more encouragement, authentic feedback, and acknowledgment of children efforts. Conversely, Emma (Setting 1), Julie (Setting 2), Carla (Setting 3) and Kate (Setting 4) would most often give superficial encouragement through praise, especially focused on ‘product’ versus ‘process’ (i.e. how successful children’s product of play was, rather than the developing skills children exhibit during the process of play).
4.1.2.2.8  *Has access to models and help for peaceful resolution of conflicts*

Educators model appropriate behaviours for children, and are in a position to support children to resolve conflicts. All educators (N = 10) were observed at some point in the data collection process intervening during peer conflicts. Educators approach to intervening in child conflicts differed depending on their pedagogy, for example, some educators (n = 5) would adopt a controlling approach, directing children’s conflict, while others (n = 5) would adopt a guidance approach, taking time to discuss the situation and supporting children to resolve their own conflicts. Identifying the distinction in educators’ approaches to support child conflict was observed by the researcher, informed by her knowledge of behaviour management. In addition to individual educators’ pedagogy, another circumstance observed to impact on educators ability to support children’s conflicts occurred when educators were preoccupied with routine transition times. For example, Vignette 4.23 demonstrates a short, superficial intervention from the Carla in a peer conflict situation.

**Vignette 4.23 Controlling conflict intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 4</th>
<th>Children: Linda and Peter</th>
<th>RRRRS Level (Linda): 2.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kate</td>
<td>RRRRS Level (Peter): 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Linda and Peter both had hold of tricycle handles. Linda squealed loudly. **Kate:** Linda, don’t squeal. Peter, let her have the bike first and you can have it next. Peter let go of the bike.

In the above example, no attempt was made by the educator to support conflict resolution between the two children. No explanation was given as to why Lucy was given the bike first, and no opportunity was provided for the children to resolve the conflict themselves (with appropriate guidance from Kate).
When educators spent more time supporting children to resolve their conflicts, with quality verbal exchanges, the resolution was a product of both child and educator input, as seen in Vignette 4.24.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.24 Supportive conflict intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time:</strong> PM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Blake took Ralph’s ball, and started to run away. Ralph chased Blake, crying and screaming.

**Ralph:** Stop! Stop!

Blake stopped running but would not give Ralph the ball, though Ralph was reaching for it. Kim walked over to Blake and Ralph and got down on their level.

**Kim:** What’s going on boys?

**Ralph:** That’s mine, I had it

**Blake:** No!

Ralph started to cry. Kim held one hand on each of the boys shoulder.

**Kim:** Blake, I could see that Ralph had the ball over there, and that you took it from him. Why did you do that?

**Blake:** (shrugged)

**Kim:** How do you think Ralph feels when you take something he was playing with

**Blake:** Sad

**Kim:** What is another way you could play with a ball

**Blake:** Get another ball

**Kim:** I think that is a great idea, Blake! Why don’t we go and get another ball from the shed. And what will you do with this ball?

Blake looked at the ball, and then handed it to Ralph. Ralph took the ball.

**Ralph:** Thanks

**Kim:** Well done boys, it is so nice that we worked this out together. Now let’s go and get a ball for you, Blake. Blake and Kim walked to the shed together.

The above example demonstrated the extra time that some educators would take when supporting children to deal with peer conflict.

In relation to peer conflicts, a common practice observed was educators’ encouraging children to “use your words”. The practice of children saying “stop, I don’t like it” (while holding their hand up to a child who was hurting them or taking their toys) was very common in all settings (N = 5). In the 2 to 3 year room especially,
children were observed using this strategy without prompts from educators, and educators’ would remind children to employ this tactic.

4.1.2.2.9  Receives expressions of positive feelings

Educators expressing positive feelings towards children (by demonstrating joy, warmth and acknowledgement of children’s efforts) are an indicator of positive interactions. The type of expression of feeling offered to children varied vastly amongst the sample. For instance, some educators (n = 3) were observed using affectionate terms when addressing children, for example, calling children “darling” “sweetie” “gorgeous” or “honey”. These educators included Valarie (Setting 3), Renee (Setting 4) and Nina (Setting 5). These same educators were also more likely to be physically affectionate towards children, through positive touch (hugs, kisses, hand holding). This was also evident in the interview responses, for example, one educator stated that

...I can’t help calling them by pet names ... I think it make them feel loved and feel special (Renee, Setting 4).

Also, most educators in the sample (n = 8) would express positive feelings towards children through affirmations of children’s positive behaviours, efforts and accomplishment. These educators (n = 8) would more often employ positive, yet superficial phrases such as “I’m so proud of you” “good boy/girl” “well done”. Fewer educators (n = 5) would follow these types of exclamations up with more meaningful acknowledgment of the child’s effort and circumstance, for example “I could see you concentrating on that for a long time, and you didn’t give up even when it got hard”. These types of interactions were positively received by children, as seen through children’s smiles and verbal exchanges.
Another example of educators’ expressing positive feelings was observed when children were distressed. Soothing tones and comforting phrases were employed by educators, for example, “it’s going to be alright” or “I’ll take care of you”. These interactions would noticeably comfort the child, as evidenced by a reduction in crying (as seen in Vignette 4.10).

There were interactions observed between child and educator where positive feelings and affection were not given to children. These interactions were typically high in conflict and the researcher noted them as ‘low’ on the RRRRS. For example, rushed and hurried interactions during nappy changes, dismissal of attachment seeking behaviours and a lack of reciprocity in children affectionate advances (children reaching for cuddles, and educators would not cuddle them) (as seen in Vignette 4.20).

Overall, it was observed that children were most likely to receive expression of positive feelings from educators when they were engaged in unhurried periods of the day (i.e. not during routine transition times).

4.1.2.2.10 *Positive feelings are directed towards the child e.g. laughs/smiles together*

Positive feelings are directed towards the child in meaningful ways when educators smile and laugh with the child during the day. Observations revealed educators could be quite playful; winking and smiling at children during quiet times. This would result in children smiling and laughing, as illustrated in Vignette 4.25.
Vignette 4.25 Playfulness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Children: Nathan</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nathan was eating his lunch at the table. He looked over at Kim, who caught his eye. Kim winked at Nathan, and smiled. Nathan smiled back widely, and continued to eat. Moments later, he looked at Kim again. She winked and smiled again at Nathan, this time he laughed. They did this several times before other children joined in.

This type of interaction was common amongst some educators (n = 4), and not common with others (n = 4). For example, it appeared that ‘playfulness’ was evident in some educators practice (Kim, Sophie, Valarie, Renee), whereas this was not as evident in other educators practice (for example, Karen, Carla, Julie and Kate). Other educators (n = 2) tended to have a balance of playfulness and seriousness (for example, Emma and Nina). This was observed and noted by the researcher as a pedagogical practice, as it did not tend to discriminate between children (i.e. all children received the same interactions, regardless of RRRRS level). One educator announced her tendency to be playful, and identified it as a skill in developing educator-child relationships

... Everyone knows I’m a goof. I play with them, I’m silly, I do all the crazy stuff. They love it. It’s something I do deliberately to get them to like me right from the start (Kim, Setting 1).

4.1.2.2.11 Questions and comments of interests to the child are made

Positive interactions between educators and children are facilitated when educators ask questions and make comments about children’s interests. Educators were observed to casually ask the children questions throughout the day. Observations revealed that educators would inquire into children’s activities throughout the day, briefly asking questions such as “what are you doing” or making
comments such as “you look like you’re having fun”. The observation data revealed that these types of questions and comments were directed at children during meal times and sleep times, where educators were sitting with children as a group. Vignette 4.26 provides a snapshot of educators and children engaged in conversation during mealtimes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.26 Mealtime conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The whole group of children sat around two separate tables, with an educator at each table, and ate lunch. Carla had a bowl of food in her hand, and ate with the children. She was focused on the group, watching them, making comments and asking questions.

In these instances, educators would be focused on the entire group for a long period of time (20 minutes during meal times, on average). It was during these times where educator would be seated and engaged with the children in casual conversation. Educators asking children questions was even evident in the birth-to-2 room, where children’s verbal communications skills were very limited.

Similarly, educators would randomly comment on children’s activities and experiences throughout the day. Typically, children would be the ones to invite educators to interact with them.

**4.1.2.2.12 Children’s social bids are extended/elaborated**

Children direct social bids towards educators (such as reaching for educators, handed educators toys or asking educators to play) as a way to initiate positive interactions. Children’s social bids towards educators were typically acknowledged by educators, however the degree to which these were extended and elaborated on
was limited. When children would ask educators’ questions, or show educators something, educators were observed to feign interest for short bursts, and then continue with their original focus. This was especially true during transition times, where educators were focused on preparations for the next transition period (meal times/sleep times/indoor play/outdoor play).

Social bids directed at peers were also observed. Within the birth-to-2 room, observations of children engaging in social play was limited, possibly due to the developmental stage of the children. When the birth to 2 children would engage in social play, it was not extensively supported or encouraged by educators. Rather, educators would intervene when children were experiencing peer conflict (such as biting/pushing or fighting over toys). Children’s social cues were therefore not found to be well supported by educators when it came to peer interactions in the birth to 2 years group.

In the 2 to 3 years age group, however, children social bids with peers were often encouraged, and educators would model pro-social behaviours. As previously identified (for example see Section 4.2.4.8 Vignette 4.25), models of conflict resolution were the most common form of interactions with educators’ in regards to extending peer social bids, however educators would also direct positive social behaviours to children, such as asking to join in play activities, and these were observed by the researcher as being mimicked by children.

**4.1.2.2.13 Guided by suggestions of what to do, rather than what not to do**

Children develop autonomy and independence when educators guide them with suggestions of what to do (would you like to move to the sandpit) rather than what not to do (don’t sit there). Some educators (n = 5) would consistently make an
effort to get down to the child’s level, regardless of what child she was interacting with, and guide the child using positive suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do. For example, ‘I messages’ were evident in some educators discussion with child “I am worried you will hurt yourself if you stand on the chair, let’s use our feet on the floor instead”. Also, educators would commonly articulate their redirection requests to children from a needs basis “I need for you to pack up the table so that we can have lunch”, rather than using directive and controlling language such as “pack up the table now”. Children were observed to respond well to this style of guidance, and most often would cooperate.

Conversely, some educators (n = 5) would be rather abrupt with directions and guidance, commonly using the words “no”, “don’t do that”, and “stop it” when children were exhibiting undesirable behaviours. This, too, would result in child compliance, and a reduction in undesirable behaviour at the time. However, in rooms where educators adopted this type of controlling approach (highly directive), it was noted that the occurrence of guidance techniques needed to be employed frequently during the day, as opposed to the rooms where a guidance approach (highly responsive) was employed by educators. To elaborate, the undesired behaviours of children were found in those rooms where educators told the children what not to do (i.e. “don’t do that”). The findings revealed that the type of approach educators adopted in these instances was indicative of their pedagogy, for example, educators would use the same approach regardless of the situation or child. Based on the naturalistic observation data (and informed by the researchers knowledge of behaviour guidance techniques), educators appeared to practice either a guidance approach (n = 5) or controlling approach (n = 5) to children’s behaviour.
4.1.2.2.14 Summary of positive interactions

Overall, the presence of positive interactions between children and educators’ was found to be lacking in both the RRRRS data (M = 2.97) and the naturalistic observations data. On the contrary, the interview data revealed that educators considered positive interactions to be one of the most important aspects of forming positive educator-child relationships. This indicates a disconnect between educators’ perspectives and practice.

The research data identified a concurrent theme within most positive interaction indicators, in routine transition times interfered with educators’ ability to engage in sustained one on one play interactions. Observations undertaken during transition times and busy periods revealed less meaningful interactions and less time spent with children across the sample. Educators’ individual pedagogy and practices emerged from the data as influencing the quality of educator-child interactions in the sample, with educators tending to adopt the same teaching strategies and approaches to interacting with children.

4.1.2.3 Quality verbal exchange signal

The nature of verbal exchanges between educators and children were found to be present in the ECEC setting, albeit superficial and brief. During the interviews, educators did not go into detail about the influence of quality verbal interactions of their relationships with children, however the naturalistic observations captured examples of verbal exchanges between educators and children occurred daily. Quality verbal exchanges was found in the RRRRS data to be one of the lower scoring signals (M = 2.98), informed by 12 individual indicators, including:
1. Educators engage in respectful, reciprocal communication exchanges with parents
2. Is engaged in sustained two way, turn taking conversational interactions
3. Communication/interaction/conversations are initiated that reflect the child’s developing understandings and interests
4. Is given time to make expressions understood
5. Is given time to respond
6. Initiated interactions are built upon
7. Engaged in discussions of an activity in which they’re both engaged, chatting about what’s going on, what’s being observed, what’s being experienced
8. Wonder, exclamations, questions and comments are responded to
9. Shares in social language games initiated by educator
10. Non-verbal language is used to add meaning to words
11. Child’s home language (if other than English) is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchanges
12. Is greeted when arrives, awakens and leaves

The findings relating to the 12 indicators of the quality of verbal exchanges signal of the RRRRS is presented to provide insight into the levels of educator-child relationships.

4.1.2.3.1 Educator engages in respectful, reciprocal communication exchanges with parents

Respectful communication between educators and parents provide good modelling to children. Interactions between educators and parents were observed as being appropriate and positive – no negative interactions or altercations were observed (i.e. a negative altercation would be considered to be argumentative or dismissive in nature). The language educators would use with parents changed depending on the parent, and therefore the observation data revealed different communication styles.
Several educator-parent relationships (n = 14) were observed as being quite familiar in nature. Interactions between these educators and parents were found to be jovial in nature, with jokes and humour present throughout the interaction. The educators and parents would engage in more personal conversations, suggesting a private relationship was held outside of the ECEC setting. For example, some parents would discuss particular people and events from, for example, weekend activities. In these instances, the educator would respond knowingly, and this demonstrated to the educator that the educator and parent are familiar with each other outside of the ECEC setting. Educators also referred to this during the interviews, with one such example presented below:

... I know a fair few parents out of work anyway, which happens in a small town. I play netball with Chelsea’s mum, and Timothy is my nephew ... Yeah, I guess that ensures a good connection between me and the kids, ’cause I know them very well (Carla, Setting 3)

As the researcher did not observe every arrival and departure of every child who participated, therefore did not see educators engage with all parents, the number of educators who knew parents personally could not be accurately quantified.

In other cases, educators would be quite brief and professional, exchanging information about the child’s day in a matter of fact way, however still friendly and positive. This was evidenced by the questions asked by parents, for example “was he good today?” is a closed question that does not invite elaboration, whereas “what did he do today?” tended to allow for a more in depth response from the educator. The RRRRS data did not reveal any connection between educator-parent communication and educator-child relationship levels.
Educators mentioned their relationships with parents as being an important factor that influenced their relationship with children, and this data will be presented in relation to RQ2, found in section 4.2.3.1.2, as it encapsulates more than just communication between educators and parents.

4.1.2.3.2 *Is engaged in sustained two way, turn taking conversational interactions*

Educators and children should be engaged in two-way conversations during the ECEC day, as this supports language development, social skills, positive interactions and educator-child relationships (DEEWR, 2009). The findings from the data revealed that educators and children would engage in turn taking conversations daily, however these could not be defined as ‘sustained’ conversations, as they were brief. While comments or questions between educators and children would occur sporadically throughout the day across the sample, they were usually brief and superficial in nature. These two-way conversations tended to occur more frequently when opportunities for one on one interactions were present, for example, during nappy changing time or quiet times in the room (sleep periods).

Indicative of the age and stage of development of children in the sample, the birth-to-2 rooms had less turn taking conversations present, perhaps being due to children’s limited verbal communication skills. Educators working in the birth-to-2 rooms (n = 5) would adapt to this obstacle by inferring meaning from non-verbal communication exhibited by children, such as their pointing and smiling. For example, when a child would point to an object in the room, educators would respond in kind with responses such as “do you want the cup? Ok, here you go” and educators would retrieve the cup. In this way, the child’s non-verbal communication became a part of this two-way conversation, and educators continued to promote
language within the room. Similarly, if educators were speaking to children, and the child responded with a smile, it would encourage further conversation.

In the 2 to 3 year old room children had more advanced verbal communication skills, which allowed for more two-way conversations between educators and children. In this age group, observations revealed that even though children were able to converse with educators, these conversations were still limited, typically due to the busy nature of the ECEC setting. An example of a conversation between child and educator that was cut short is illustrated in Vignette 4.27.

**Vignette 4.27 Conversation interrupted**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 5</th>
<th>Children: Robert</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 2.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Nina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robert arrived at the ECEC setting, and Nina greeted his arrival, and engaged in a brief discussion with his mother. When his mother left, Nina and Robert walked to the drawing table and sat together.

**Nine**: What are you going to draw?
**Robert**: A fish, my fish
**Nina**: Oh you have a fish at home! What is your fish’s name?
**Robert**: Penny
**Nina**: Penny is a great name. What do you like about fish
**Robert**: Swimming. I swim, too
**Nina**: Swimming is lots of fun! I like to swim at the beach. Nina looked over towards the block corner as a loud crash came from where two children had knocked over a tall stack of blocks.

**Nina**: I’ll be back in a minute - I’m just going to help Terry and Zack. Nina walked over to the block corner and engaged with Terry and Zack. Robert stayed at the drawing table for several minutes; Nina did not return.

This example was a very typical two-way communication interaction found in the 2 to 3 year old room, in that the potential for sustained turn taking conversations was present, however was not taken advantage of due to distractions, such as other children requiring support, routine transition times or lengthy collegial discussions.
4.1.2.3.3 Communication/interaction/conversations are initiated that reflect the child’s developing understandings and interests

Communication between educators and children occurred throughout the day, for various reasons and in various ways. For example, most of the communication between educators and children were directive, in that educators would be asking the child to do something, or the child was asking the educator for assistance with someone. There were not as many moments observed where communication between educators and children occurred based on interests or play experiences, however there was evidence that such interactions did occur. The researcher observed educators commenting on children’s interest most often when the child was distressed, seemingly with the aim to redirect the child’s attention.

4.1.2.3.4 Is given time to make expressions understood

Observations relating to this indicator tended to demonstrate educators’ ability to communicate in ways that children would understand, for example, clear pronunciation, slow speech and word repetition. It was noted by the researcher that some educators in the sample were more accomplished in their verbal communication with children when it came to this indicator. When educators were observed meeting this indicator, it was encapsulated in four recurring traits: 1) speaking clearly and slowly in an appropriate tone; 2) being on the child’s physical level; 3) using age appropriate language; and 4) having the child repeat words back to the educator. When all four of these traits were present in educators’ verbal communication with children, the exchange was recorded as high quality, demonstrated by the child’s understanding of the encounter.
Observations that demonstrated educators not allowing enough time for children to understand expressions were evident in during the data collection period, typically by the same educators, and would most often be accompanied with physical intervention. For example, if an educator was giving a child an instruction to sit on the map for group time, and the child continued to play in the home corner, the educators would physically walk over and take the child by the hand and sit them on the mat, rather than employing verbal strategies to support the child’s understandings. This type of physical intervention, rather than further elaboration in the verbal exchange, appeared to diminish opportunities for the child to wholly understand educators’ expressions.

4.1.2.3.5  *Is given time to respond*

This indicator was observed by noting how much time educators would allow for the child to respond to their communication – appropriate amounts of time ensure children have the opportunity to respond without being talked over or without the educators moving on from the verbal exchange. Moments throughout the day when educators would provide instructions to children, such as “can you please put this in your bag” or “do you want a drink?”, they would typically allow enough time for the child to respond. Some educators \((n = 6)\) were found to fluently provide quality verbal exchanges, giving time for children to both understand and respond to direction, which appeared to have positive outcomes in regards to children’s behaviour, social interactions and involvement in the ECEC setting. An example of this can be seen in Vignette 4.28, where a child was given an instruction from the educator to support her social interaction with a peer.
Linda was watching two other girls playing in the Vet corner with the toy animals. Kate was walking past and bent down to talk to Linda.

**Kate:** Do you want to play with the animals, too?

Linda looked at Kate, but didn’t respond.

**Kate:** It looks fun, don’t you think?

Linda looked at the other girls playing, then looked at Kate and nodded.

**Kate:** So do you want to play in there?

**Linda:** Yes

**Kate:** What animal would you like to play with?

Linda looked at the remaining stuffed animals in the basket. She looked through the basket, using her hands to search for a toy animal. She pulled out a stuffed dog. She showed it to Kate.

**Linda:** The dog

**Kate:** Good choice! Why don’t you show the girls your dog

Linda hesitated.

**Kate:** Would you like me to come with you?

**Linda:** Yes, and you can have the monkey

Linda reached into the basket and pulled out the stuffed monkey, and handed it to Kate.

**Kate:** Ok great, let’s go

Kate and Linda walked into the home corner and started to talk with the girls about their animals. Kate remained in the Vet corner for roughly 2 minutes before leaving.

The above example demonstrated that when children were given enough time to respond to educators, even when initially they seemed non responsive, it appeared to support social interactions.

In line with previous data presented, the educators’ ability to allow children time to respond to instructions was influenced by the busy nature of the room. For example, during busier times of the day (such as routine transition times – moving from playtime to lunchtime), educators would not exhibit as much patience in their communication with children, and so would often speak to children without allowing the child time to respond. For example, if an educator gave an instruction to a child, she would most often move on to another child or situation that required her
attention before a response from the first child could be given. Thereby, children would receive the instruction, and then be left alone to follow through.

4.1.2.3.6 Initiated interactions are built upon

Interactions initiated by educator or child can be built upon to extend play and learning. It was noted during naturalistic observations that when children initiated interactions, educators were less likely to build on these interactions in sustained and meaningful ways. However, when educators would initiate interactions, they were more often extended. Further inspection of the data revealed that when children would initiate interactions, educators were often otherwise engaged with other children or educators, housekeeping duties or routine transition times, restricting the educators time and ability to extend the interaction.

When educators initiated interactions, it was when they had time to do so. For example, once duties had been completed, and transition times were over, educators would move around the room and initiate contact with children. Sometimes this was brief and superficial, for example a general comment directed at the child regarding the activity they were engaged with, however on occasion the educator would find a child or small group of children and sit with them, both initiating and building on interactions in meaningful ways. An example of this can be seen in Vignette 4.29, where an educator appeared to purposefully scan the room and position herself with a small group of children.

### Vignette 4.29 Playing with dolls together

| Setting: 2 | Children: Bethany & Lauren | RRRRS Level (Bethany): 3.5 |
| Time: AM | Educator: Julie | RRRRS Level (Lauren): 2.6 |

Julie finished changing the last child’s nappy and walked into the room, where children were engaged in activities. Julie focused on Bethany and Lauren, who were sitting of the floor with the dolls. Julie walked over to them and sat down.
**Julie:** Can I play with the dolls, too?
Julie, Bethany and Lauren spent over five minutes together playing with the dolls.

4.1.2.3.7 *Engaged in discussions of an activity in which they’re both engaged,*

*chatting about what’s going on, what’s being observed, what’s being experienced.*

This indicator reflects the nature of sustained, engaged conversations between children and educators. Prolonged discussions between educator and child were infrequently observed throughout the data, especially in the birth-to-2 rooms.

In the 2 to 3 year old rooms, it was observed that children would chat with their educators about their activities, an example of which can be seen in Vignette 2.30.

### Vignette 4.30 Puppet play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Katrina</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kim and Katrina were sitting on the mat facing one another. Kim had a cat puppet on her hand, while Katrina had a Dog puppet on her hand.

**Kim:** Meow (in a high pitched voice)

**Katrina:** Woof woof (low bark)

**Kim:** I’m such a hungry little cat, are you a hungry little dog?

**Katrina:** Yes (she moved the puppets head up and down)

**Kim:** What are we going to eat?

**Katrina:** Bananas!

**Kim:** Bananas sound yummy! Where could we find bananas? (Kim gestured the puppet to look left and right)

**Katrina:** Over there! (she pointed to the kitchen home corner)

**Kim:** Great idea! Lets go for a walk and get ourselves some bananas, dog (Kim meowed)

Kim and Katrina walked their puppets over to the kitchen area.

**Kim:** Where are the bananas?

**Katrina:** Here (gesturing to an empty bowl)

**Kim:** Oh I see them now! Ok lets eat!

They both made eating noises and moved their puppets to the bowl. After a few seconds of this, they started laughing together.
This example demonstrated an educator and child engaging in positive and sustained interactions. In these cases, educators would do well to extend the conversation, and note the experience the child was having. This was not observed often, however, as findings from the observations showed that educators and children were not deeply engaged in activities or conversation, and when they were these encounters were brief, due to interruptions and preoccupation with routine transition times, housekeeping/administration duties or other children or educators. This was considered to be a contributing factor to the lower level of quality verbal exchanges found in the RRRRS data.

4.1.2.3.8 Wonder, exclamations, questions and comments are responded to

Children share their experiences with educators in ECEC, and educators should respond with wonder, questions and comments to extend children’s experiences and learning (DEEWR, 2009). The data showed a variety of interactions between educators and child where children’s wonder and exclamations were responded to with interest by the educator. Across the sample, it was found that in the birth-to-2 room educators would respond with enthusiasm and delight. For example, when a child had limited verbal skills, but would point to object or show educators objects, the educator would respond intensely to the child. These encounters tended to encapsulate shared interest and enthusiasm between educator and child. Some educators (n = 3) appeared better able to respond to children’s wonder and exclamations with vibrant enthusiasm than others. For example, these educators would be visibly excited by the child’s interest (such as showing a big smile or clapping), while other educators (n = 2) would simply nod and acknowledge the child’s interest.
In the 2 to 3 years age group, wonder and exclamations were also responded to by educators \((n = 5)\), however this tended to be less enthusiastic and more of an acknowledgment of the child’s attempt to engage. These moments were extended upon with questions and comments, which would occasionally result in sustained interactions, however this was rarely observed. Rather, the educator acknowledged child’s exclamations, and then the child and educator would both go on to continue with what they were doing.

4.1.2.3.9 Shares in social language games initiated by educator

Social language games can include singing, puppet play, board games and group games (such as ‘duck duck goose’). Social language games initiated by educators were predominantly in the form of ‘group times’. Group times in the ECEE settings consisted of all children gathering on a mat in the room, while one educator would sit in front of the children and either read a story, sing a song, play a game, or a combination of the three. Group times were observed as the most meaningful space where social language games were facilitated and extended upon by educators, and participated in by children. Educators would model pro-social skills and language during group times, and support children to do the same. All 2 to 3 year old rooms \((n = 5)\) were observed to have ‘show and tell’ as a group time (where children would stand in front of the group and ‘show’ an object and ‘tell’ a story about it). One such observation illustrated in Vignette 4.31 shows that a child stood in front of the group of children for ‘show and tell’
Kim sat on a chair in front of the whole group of children, while the other educator prepared the table for lunch. Kim read a book to the children, and then addressed the group.

**Kim:** Ok who would like to do a show and tell today?

Nathan raised his hand, as well as several other children.

**Kim:** Nathan, if you have something to show us during show and tell, can you please get it from your bag and come and stand up here next to me?

**Nathan:** Ok

Nathan went to his bag and retrieved two photos, and then walked over to Kim and faced the front of the group.

**Kim:** What have you got to show and tell us today, Nathan?

Nathan held up the photos, looking at Kim.

**Kim:** Oh, photos! Can you tell us a little bit about these photos?

Nathan faced the group.

**Nathan:** This is my new baby (Nathan pointed to a photo of himself holding a baby, and a photo of a baby)

**Kim:** Your new baby is beautiful! Can you tell us about your new baby?

**Nathan:** He’s my brother and his name is John

**Kim:** What does John do?

**Nathan:** (hesitates) Johns cries sometimes (laughs)

**Kim:** You are a big brother now, how exciting! Does anyone have questions for Nathan about his new brother?

Nathan continued to talk about his brother with the group of children.

The above vignette identified many positive aspects of the social language opportunities facilitated by educators, where educators were present, attentive and without distraction for typically 10-minutes to 15-minutes one or two times a day. Through these experiences, children were observed using and building on their social skills, with the support of educators.

In the birth to 2 years group, these group times were constructed differently, with a small group of children (rather than whole group of children) together at once for group activities. Educators would initiate small group times, or a one on one interaction between an educator and child would be built upon as other children from the room joined in voluntarily. In the birth-to-2 rooms (n = 5), these social
language games were primarily singing and reading. Songs would be sung by the educator, who would then encourage the children to sing along, and this was achieved by acknowledging children’s effort and participation. An example of the group singing together can be seen in Vignette 4.32:

**Vignette 4.32 Group singing**

| Setting: 3 | Children: Grace, Samantha & Luke | RRRRS Level (Grace): 2.6 |
| Time: PM   | Educator: Valarie               | RRRRS Level (Samantha): 3.1 |
|           |                                 | RRRRS Level (Luke): 4.2 |

Valarie sat on the floor, with Grace sitting on her knee and Samantha and Luke sitting at her feet.

**Valarie:** Who wants to sing a song?
The children smiled.

**Valarie:** Ok, how about ‘Old McDonald’?
The children nodded and exclaimed ‘yeah’

Valarie: Old McDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O, and on that farm he had a .... ? (Valarie paused and pointed at Samantha)

**Samantha:** Duck!

**Valarie:** He had a duck! E-I-E-I-O. With a quack quack here, and a quack quack there...
The children made quacking noises with Valarie, and sang along as best they could. Valarie continued to sing until all children had contributed to the song by choosing an animal.

The above Vignettes provided the richest data that was collected during the observation period, however pertained to group experiences. One on one social language initiated by educators was less predominant in the sample, and when it did occur it was usually during quiet times in the room. For example, when educators were engaging with children one on one, social language was observed between educator and child in the form of two-way conversation.

4.1.2.3.10 *Non-verbal language is used to add meaning to words*

Non-verbal language includes smiles, hand gestures and body language.

Educators across the sample were all observed at time adopting additional
communicative techniques, other than verbal, including body language and gestures. This would be seen to support verbal exchanges, as illustrated in Vignette 4.33.

### Vignette 4.33 Non-verbal cue

| Setting: 3 | Children: Mary | RRRRS Level: 3.9 |
| Time: PM   | Educator: Valarie |

The majority of children were sleeping, while three children played quietly in the room. Valarie had one child on her knee, as they worked on a puzzle together. Mary pushed buttons on an interactive toy, which caused loud animal noises to occur. Mary looked over at Valarie, who put her index finger to her lips (indicating quiet). Mary smiled and started playing with another toy.

The above Vignette is one example of educators employing gestures as language to communicate with children. Typically, this would occur throughout educator-child exchanges. In particular, when educators would need to intervene to guide children’s behaviour, they would commonly use their hand, extended and raised, to indicate a ‘stop’ signal before beginning a verbal exchange.

4.1.2.3.11 Child’s home language (if other than English) is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchanges

This indicator would be evident in educators using a child’s home language (other than English) in the verbal exchanges with the child. The sample of children who participated in this study (n = 92) all spoke English as their first language, as did their families. As such, this indicator was marked as 0 (zero) for ‘no opportunity’, as the indicator was not observed amongst the sample. This method ensures the RRRRS results are not influenced in any way by this missing indicator.

4.1.2.3.12 Is greeted when arrives, awakens and leaves

Educators greet children daily by saying ‘hello’ on arrival, ‘goodbye’ upon departure and in their response to children waking from sleep, as this practice
supports educator-child relationships through connectedness. This indicator of 
*quality verbal exchanges* was found to be consistently reported as ‘high’ in the 
RRRSS, as educators would consistently greet children on their arrival to the ECEC 
setting, and farewell children on their departure. Observations of children arriving 
and departing the ECEC setting were repetitive, methodical and positive in nature. 
Typically, a certain script was followed, involving saying hello to the child and parent, 
gaining parent/educator handover (how the child slept and what the child ate at 
home/ECEC), and followed by a ‘goodbye’, either from the educator or parent 
(depending on if the child was arriving or departing).

When children awoke from sleep times, educators would be more likely to 
specifically greet the children on their awakening in the birth-to-2 room. In this 
room, children typically slept in cots, and so require educators to physically lift them 
from their sleeping area. These children would tend to wake at different times, 
allowing more time for one on one interactions between child and educator. When 
children in this room would awaken, educators would greet the child in nurturing 
ways, often asking “did you have a good sleep?” This was followed by nappy 
changing, during which further discussion would occur, albeit infrequently. For 
example, some educators would spend less time conversing with children during 
nappy change times than others.

In the 2 to 3 year old room, children tended to sleep at the same time and 
therefore would awaken during the same time frame. In this case, sleep time 
(including getting the children to sleep and children waking up) was categorised as 
one of the busiest periods of the day, and therefore educators were less likely to 
greet children individually upon their awakening. For example, a typical daily scene
at this time would see one educator dress the child and support toileting, while the other educator would pack away bedding. When children rose from sleep, they would mostly be directed to the educator who was in charge of supporting their dressing and toileting, and therefore quality verbal exchanges were observed to be minimal and superficial.

4.1.2.3.13 **Summary of quality verbal exchanges**

The data revealed that the quality of verbal exchanges between the children and educators was one of the lower scoring signals in the RRRRS data (M = 2.98), and this was supported by the naturalistic observations and interviews (as no educator discussed quality verbal exchanges or communication in detail). The limited amount of sustained verbal interactions between educators and children was found to be due to distraction caused by other children, other educators and routine transition times.

The age and stage of development of children was also found to be a factor influencing the quality of verbal exchanges. In the birth-to-2 rooms, where children’s verbal communication skills are limited, meaningful and sustained communication was less evident. However, some educators would still facilitate communication with children through other means, and infer meaning from children’s non-verbal communicative exchanges, thereby enabling communication between the pair. Typically, across the sample, the most meaningful verbal exchanges were found to occur in group situations, either small groups or whole groups of children.

4.1.2.4 **Appropriateness signal**

Findings from the RRRRS data identified various indicators of appropriate practice that educators could be observed adopting in their efforts to build positive
educator-child relationships. Furthermore, naturalistic observations showed examples of these indicators, and interview data provided further insight into the appropriateness signal. Across the sample, appropriateness was a high scoring signal in the RRRRS (M = 4.47), and educators were consistently found to behave and interact with children in appropriate ways. A total of 13 indicators informed the RRRRS data for this signal, including:

1. Is spoken with in their own home language (if other than English) where possible
2. Close contact is in culturally familiar ways
3. Has access to models of caring behaviours amongst educators
4. Is engaged in sustained interaction
5. Efforts rather than attributes are acknowledged
6. Is treated fairly (is not discriminated against or judged)
7. Has access to models and guidance in the use of non-discriminatory language and behaviour
8. Is told what is going to happen, what is happening (is prepared for transitions)
9. There are realistic expectations of what a child can/will do
10. Receives indirect forms of support and guidance (rather than discipline) when overwhelmed – distraction, suggestion, choice, reminder, redirection
11. Emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported – trust and safety support harmful/overwhelming emotions
12. Is called by name, correctly pronounced
13. Hostility and aggression are constructively discouraged

Findings drawn from the data of each of the 13 indicators, as well as additional observations and comments derived from the interview data, will be presented to provide a comprehensive examination of this signal.
4.1.2.4.1  *Is spoken to in own home language (if other than English) where possible*

As previously mentioned, the sample of children who participated in this study (N = 92) all spoke English as their first language, along with did their families. As such, this indicator was marked as [0](zero) for ‘no opportunity’, as the indicator could not be observed amongst the sample. This method ensured the RRRRS results were not influenced in any way by this missing indicator.

4.1.2.4.2  *Close contact is in culturally familiar ways*

Educators practice should denote cultural sensitivity, and behaviours and contact should be familiar to the child in order to facilitate positive educator-child relationships, and keep a strong connection between home and the ECEC setting (ACECQA, 2013b). This indicator was difficult to determine in a critical manner, in that each child’s unique culture was not investigated (due to the scope of the research project), and so how to determine if educators’ contact with children was culturally familiar was not clear. For the purpose of this study, this indicator was considered to be met when educators would use typical westernised behaviours in their interactions with children. For example, behavioural traits indicative of the Australian culture include playfulness, humour, close physical contact when needed, eye contact and nicknames reflecting endearment. One educator stated that providing children with familiarity (culturally) provides children with a level of comfort that support educator-child relationships:

... We make sure were treat the children in the same way they are treated at home, like the same rules, the same food, the same comforters. It makes this environment familiar and helps them feel comfortable (Nina, Setting 5).
4.1.2.4.3 Has access to models of caring behaviours amongst educators

Caring behaviours were measured by observing educators interactions with others in the ECEC setting, focusing on models of physical affection, helpfulness and kindness towards others. Educators were observed to model caring behaviours through the day, directed at most children. Warmth and affection was evident through hugs, kisses and affectionate verbal exclamations (for example “you’re so wonderful”). Specifically, children in the birth-to-2 room would receive and witness educators’ physical caring behaviours, such as embraces and positive touch. Positive touch was articulated by educators’ during the interviews as an important aspect of their relationship with children, for example:

... To feel close to someone you just want to be close to them, physically. I think we all know the power of a good cuddle (Nina, Setting 5).

Educators were appropriate in their behaviours towards children for the most part, in that they would adhere to ethical practice when responding to children’s needs. For example, using appropriate language with children (verbal and non-verbal) and demonstrating care and affection towards children (for example hugs and positive affirmations). When these behaviours were implemented, children were found to be content in the environment, resulting in exploratory play.

It was also evident in the findings that there were some inappropriate behaviours towards children. Direct inappropriate behaviours educators used included eye rolling and exasperated head shaking directed at a child, lifting children from the ground by their arm, pointing a finger in a child’s face during behaviour guidance and roughly placing children on the ground. Indirect inappropriate behaviours of educators included ignoring children’s attempts to communicate or...
interact, not responding to children’s needs and deliberately leaving a child (walking away). All of these educator behaviours observed were found to elicit melancholy, unrest and disturbance in the child.

4.1.2.4.4 Is engaged in sustained interaction

An analysis of the RRRRS 45 indicators revealed that engaged sustained interactions between educators and children were limited across the sample. While interactions between educators and children did occur frequently throughout each day, in each room, these interactions tended to be brief and superficial, with sustained interactions most often present during quiet periods of the day (i.e. sleep times where fewer children were present in the room).

4.1.2.4.5 Efforts (rather than attributes) are acknowledged

This indicator was measured through observations of educators acknowledging children’s efforts rather than attributes. This indicator was very similar to ‘is given encouragement through support and acknowledgment of effort and processes (rather than products and attributes)’, found in the positive interactions signal (see section 4.2.3.7). To reiterate these findings, across the whole sample educators were found to acknowledge children’s efforts in tasks and play times, and encourage autonomy where possible (i.e. allowing children to choose and undertake tasks/activities independently).

Some educators showed increased skills in this area, for example, Kim (Setting 1), Sophie (Setting 2), Renee (Setting 4) and Nina (Setting 5) were consistently found to provide encouragement, authentic feedback, and acknowledgment of children efforts. Children responded positively to receiving authentic feedback, evidenced by their body language and verbal communication.
Conversely, Emma (Setting 1), Julie (Setting 2), Carla (Setting 3) and Kate (Setting 4) would most often give superficial encouragement through praise, especially focused on product versus process. The latter group of educators would also intervene and take over children’s effort, seemingly in an attempt to hurry the process along. Children responded to superficial encouragement and praise nonchalantly, evidenced by moving away from the educators and a reduction in attempts to initiate interactions.

4.1.2.4.6 Is treated fairly (is not discriminated or judged)

Further findings from the RRRRS and naturalistic data revealed that most children were treated fairly, in that the same expectations and limits were placed on all children within the ECEC setting. Similar findings from the interview data were also evident. For example, one educator stated that

... Even if we don’t have the same level of connection with each child, we still treat them all the same ... we don’t favour one child over the other (Kim, Setting 1).

Findings from the naturalistic data did revealed that some children (n = 6) were discriminated against, and judged harshly by their educators. Educator responses to these children were found to be harsher than others, for example, educators appeared to have less patience and higher expectations of compliance with these children. As such, interactions were seen to be limited and negative (directive and controlling in nature). These particular relationships had low scores in the RRRRS data, with levels ranging from 1.8 to 2.3, which DECS (2008) describes as non-supportive, and defined by negative and controlling interactions, with rejection and minimal affection present.
4.1.2.4.7  *Is told what is going to happen, what is happening (prepared for transitions)*

Throughout the day, educators were observed speaking to the children in clear ways to inform them of routine transition times (such as sleep times, meal times, toileting and play times). For example “we’re going to pack up now and then have lunch, and after lunch we can go outside for a play”. Educators would describe what was happening from one stage to another when in the 2 to 3 year old room, and children were appropriately supported and directed if they became distressed during these times – which was observed. One example of a child’s resistance to transition times is presented in Vignette 4.34.

### Vignette 4.34 Transition resistance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Debbie</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Debbie was playing with the play dough, and Kim announced to the group that it was time to pack up and go outside.

**Kim:** You can quickly finish what you’re playing with, and then come to me or Martha if you need help with you hat and sunscreen.

The group of children started to get their hats and sunscreen, with the support of educators, and made their way outside. When all children were outside, Debbie remained at the play dough table.

**Kim:** Debbie, we are all having a play outside. I would like for you to come and play outside with us

Debbie ignored Kim.

**Kim:** Would you like me to help you pack up the play dough?

Kim reached for the play dough and Debbie pulled it away from Kim, with a frown on her face, squirming in the chair.

Debbie: No

**Kim:** I have a good idea – why don’t we bring the play dough outside, and that way you can keep playing with it, but you will be outside in the sunshine.

Debbie: (long pause) Ok

Debbie and Kim packed up the play dough together and set it up on a table outside, where Debbie sat to play for several minutes before moving on to play in the sandpit.
The above example demonstrates not only educators’ warning children of impending transition periods, but also the allowance of flexibility in these transition periods. Familiar routines supported these transition period, such as a group story before rest time to allow the children time to unwind from their previous play experience.

In contrast, naturalistic observations showed children were hurried through routine transition times during the day. For example, Vignette 4.35 illustrates a typical hurried routine transition times, where children were not appropriately prepared for what was about to happen and were not given sufficient autonomy or choice during the transition period.

**Vignette 4.35 Silent and hurried nappy change**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Time: AM</th>
<th>Child/ren: Smith</th>
<th>Educator: Karen</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The whole group of children were outside with one educator, while Karen set up the lunch table, and started to bring children inside one by one to change their nappy and sit them at the table or highchair. Karen walked out of the room and made her way to Smith, who was sitting in the sandpit playing with the sand toys. Karen bent down and lifted him out of the sandpit. Smith dropped the shovel that was in his hand, and squirmed to retrieve it as he was lifted into the air and walked away in Karen’s arms. He protested, squirming and crying. Karen did not respond, but walked him into the change room and started changing his nappy. Smith continued to cry until his nappy was changed. Karen then sat him in a highchair, and walked outside to collect the next child. During this process, Karen did not speak one word.

This example is indicative of the birth to 2 years transition periods in all ECEC settings, where two educators are responsible to facilitate eight children having nappy/diaper changes, being fed lunch and prepared for sleep, all in a relatively short period of time (typically, all of this would occur between 11am and 12pm). These routine transition times saw children quickly and spontaneously removed from
play and social interactions, changed, fed and put to sleep with relatively little choice or autonomy in the process. The mealtime to sleep-time transition was typically the most hurried period, where educators were observed to methodically wash the face and hands of each child, change their nappy/diaper and proceed to place them in their cot or bed within the space of a few minutes (3-to-5-minutes). Even though children were not typically prepared for this through verbal indications from the educator (i.e. educators did not always specifically ‘tell’ children about imminent routine transition times), children were observed to be cooperative, and appeared to recognise the process.

Regardless for how well educators prepared children for routine transition times, findings from the RRRRS and naturalistic observation data consistently revealed that routine transition times distracted educators from providing quality responsiveness to children, and limited opportunities for educator-child play interactions.

4.1.2.4.8 There are realistic expectations of what a child can/will do

Most educators (n = 8) performed well in regards to understanding the capabilities of each child. Realistic expectations of what the child could and could not achieve independently were evident in the naturalistic observations and RRRRS data, which could be due to educator training and knowledge of child development (thereby ensuring an understanding of children’s capabilities at given stages of development). One educator stated that her knowledge of child development ensured she had reasonable expectations of children, which facilitated the development of positive relationships.
I have a lot of child development knowledge, which help me to make connections with children because I know how to talk to them, and what they like to do, and what they’re ready to do. I think it would be different if I didn’t have that knowledge, like if I saw all children as the same, put them under an umbrella, rather than look at them as individuals in different stages of development, I wouldn’t be very good at meeting their needs (Renee, Setting 4).

Similar findings were also evident in the naturalistic observations, which revealed that all ECEC environments (n = 5) were designed to meet the specific age and development of children in the room. For example, the furniture (small in size), equipment (designed for specific age group – i.e. no choking hazards for the birth to 3 years age) and play spaces designed (more floor activities in the birth-to-2 rooms, as children are crawling and less able to access table tops). Further findings showed that educators’ interactions were mostly tailored to the specific developmental stages of each child. For example, the complexity of language used in verbal exchanges changed depending on the age of the child. The factors contributed to educators’ expectation of children’s abilities and function within the ECEC setting. For example, in the birth-to-2 room educators would feed children by hand, whereas in the 2 to 3 year old room educators would encourage children to feed themselves, with recognition that this skill is able to be learned by children in this age range.

4.1.2.4.9 Receives indirect forms of support and guidance (rather than discipline) when overwhelmed – distraction, suggestion, choice, reminder, redirection

Findings from the naturalistic observations revealed two main categories in relation to the guidance children received when overwhelmed. These included: 1) controlling approach; and 2) guidance approach. A controlling approach is highly demanding and directive, where educators pose limits on children’s behaviour and
enforce those limits with threats of punishment or elicit desired behaviours through promises of rewards (Porter, 2016). A guidance approach is highly responsive, where educators discuss behaviour with children, provide models for positive resolution, encourage emotional regulation. Educators who adopt a guidance approach offer children choices, and demonstrate patience in allowing children to have autonomy and independence (Porter, 2016). A guidance approach is the desired practice in Australian ECEC (DEECD, 2011).

A controlling approach in the sample was identifiable by educators’ verbal exchanges with the child, for example, abrupt dictation, rather than suggestions and reminders. One such example is illustrated in Vignette 4.36.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.36 Stop that!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting:</strong> 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time:</strong> AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sally was attempting to open the bathroom door from outside, and started to cry and bang on the door after several unsuccessful attempts. Carla noticed this and walked over towards Sally.

**Carla:** Stop that, Sally. Just open it.
Carla opened the door and Sally walked into the bathroom

**Carla:** See, that wasn’t hard.

The above example did not guide the child’s efforts, nor did it support the child’s feeling of being overwhelmed. Rather, it was a very abrupt interaction, indicative of the controlling approach adopted by some educators often in the ECEC setting. Educators threatening punishment for behaviour was also observed, for example “if you don’t eat your lunch you won’t get any fruit”. Promises of rewards for desirable behaviour was also recorded, for example, children using a sticker rewards chart when self-toileting (place a sticker on the chart when the child goes to
the toilet independently). Children would conform to the limits and directions imposed on them by these educators (n = 5).

When educators adopted a guidance approach, they would often ask reflecting questions that would foster children’s autonomy and offering children choices when faced with problems. This was especially evident when children’s behaviour required intervention, as illustrated in Vignette 4.37.

Vignette 4.37 A good idea!

| Setting: 2 | Child/ren: Tanya |
| Time: PM | Educator: Sophie |

Tanya was in the sandpit with a shovel in her hand. She scooped large amounts of sand using her shovel, and tossed it outside of the sandpit. Small amounts of sand were falls on Tanya as she as she did this, and she squealed, brushing the sand off herself. She did the same thing again, with more sand landing on here, and she started to cry a little. Sophie walked over to Tanya, and sat next to her, helping to brush the sand from Tanya’s hair.

**Sophie:** Tanya, what are you trying to build in the sandpit?

**Tanya:** A hole

**Sophie:** I can see that your hole is getting very big, and I can also see that a lot of our sand is going outside of the sandpit. What do you think will happen if you keep putting the sand out of the sandpit?

**Tanya:** The sand will go out there (points beyond the sandpit)

**Sophie:** Yes I think you’re right! That wouldn’t leave much sand for us to play with in the sandpit then. Where else could we put the sand while you’re digging your hole?

**Tanya:** (looked around her) In the bucket?

**Sophie:** What a good idea! Can you see any buckets here?

Sophie looked for a bucket. When she saw one, she went over to retrieve it.

**Sophie:** That’s a nice big bucket, why don’t we see how much sand the bucket can hold

Sophie and Tanya filled the bucket with sand. Tanya then started to put the sand in the bucket, not out of the sandpit.

The example identifies the additional time and efficient language adopted by educators who would use a guidance approach, and either redirect children or support their recovery from being overwhelmed. Children responded positively
when these educators (n = 5) would take the time to discuss behaviour, and were
allowed to make their own choices in moving on from the situation.

4.1.2.4.10 Emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported – trust and
safety support harmful overwhelming emotions

This indicator informs how capable educators were in recognising and
appropriately responding to children’s emotional needs (such as distress, pain, fright
– all of which elicit attachment behaviours). Overall, educators were adept in
recognising children’s various emotions, and responded to them appropriately.

Educators described establishing trust in the educator-child relationship as a very
important aspect. This level of trust was articulated as being reliant on the
educators’ ability to recognise and respond to the children’s emotional needs, not
only their basic needs, with one such example identified below:

... They have to trust that were know how to take care of them, and that we
know how to make them feel happy (Julie, Setting 2)

Educators were observed discussing children’s emotional state with one
another during the day, For example, one educator was heard telling the assistant
educator that “he is so sad today, I think it’s because mum’s been away at work for
the last few days. We’ll have to give him lots of cuddles today” (Renee, Setting 4).

Educators’ recognition of children’s emotional state appeared to support the
implementation of strategies in the ECEC setting that were aimed to support
children.

4.1.2.4.11 Is called by name, correctly pronounced

This indicator informed the RRRRS data, and was measure through
observations of educators when they would speak to children throughout the day.
Using children’s correct name ensures that children’s unique identity is supported and that children feel respected (DEEWR, 2009). Children’s first names were always used, and were pronounced correctly. There were times when educators would call children by shortened versions of their names, such as “Becki” for “Rebecca”, however the researcher asked all educators (N = 10) about this practice during the observation period (not during the interview), and educators stated that they only use names suggested by the child parent. For example, there was one child named Alexander, whose mother had told the educator that she did not want him called “Alex”, and so they would never call that child Alex. There was one instance recorded from the naturalistic observations where an educator summoned the child by saying “come over here, sooky la la” is a mocking tone, however this example was the exception.

4.1.2.4.12 *Hostility and aggression are constructively discouraged*

As models for pro-social behaviour, educators are required to constructively discourage aggressions (Porter, 2016). Hostility and aggression were most often observed in child-child interactions. In the birth-to-2 room, aggression was not commonly observed, however physical altercations between children were noted, in the form of pushing and throwing objects. This would typically be the result of taking one another’s toys. Educators would intervene in these situations, and support the child who was hurt and redirect the child who had initiated the aggressive act. Occasionally, the researcher observed children directing hostility towards educators, with behaviours such as screaming, squirming out of the educators’ arms, and fist banging against the educator. When this occurred, educators’ demonstrated
patience and restraint in their response to children – at no time did educators respond with hostility or aggression.

In the 2 to 3 year old room, hostility and aggression was observed as more intentionally directed between one child and another, typically observed in social play situations, where a dispute would occur and the educator would need to intervene to resolve the conflict. The educators working with this age group (n = 5) mostly guided child hostility and aggression in a positive manner (suggestions of “using your words”), with aggression discouraged. The researcher did note that when repeated disputes occurred between two particular children, some educators would seem to favour one child over the other. One educators reaction to a common dispute between two children in the ECEC rooms were captured during a moment such as this, and are presented below

4.1.3 Summary of RQ1

Overall, the findings reveal that educator-child relationship levels were at an acceptable range, with a sample mean level of 3.5. The RRRRS defines educator-child relationships at the 3.5 level to be satisfactory, which will support the child, albeit superficially.

The signals of the RRRRS that educators were found to be scoring highly in were responsiveness (M = 4.45) and appropriateness (M = 4.47). The RRRRS and naturalistic observations data revealed that educator were mostly responsiveness to children’s basic physical needs (i.e. hunger, soiled nappy/diaper), however less responsive to children’s emotional needs (i.e. sadness, fear). The interview data showed that educators consider responsiveness to contribute positively towards their relationships with children. Educator-child relationships were found to be
appropriate in the RRRRS and naturalistic observation data, mostly by adhering to practices that guided and supported children in the ECEC setting, as identified in the NQS (ACECQA, 2013b). Appropriateness came out in the interview data in various ways, with educators articulating their ability to recognise and respond to children’s needs appropriately through their knowledge of child development, and by making connections between the ECEC setting and the child’s home.

The RRRRS signals that were found to be at a lower level were positive interactions (M = 2.97) and quality verbal exchanges (M = 2.98). The RRRRS and naturalistic observation data showed that educator-child interactions were lacking in quality in the ECEC settings, however interview data revealed that educators consider educator-child interactions to be one of the most important factors that influence educator-child relationships. It was noted that a major hindrance to sustained positive interactions between educators and children was most often due to routine transition times, which caused educators to become distracted. Naturalistic observations also captured many verbal exchanges between educators and children, and most were found to be appropriate in nature, however they were brief and superficial, rarely being built upon in meaningful ways. Quality verbal exchanges between educators and children was not raised or discussed by educators throughout the interviews often.

4.2 RQ 2 - What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?

4.2.1 Aim

Research question two was designed to identify factors contributing to the level of educator-child relationships found in ECEC settings, to provide insight into
educator-child relationships. The RRRRS and naturalistic observation data provided evidence of the construct of educator-child relationships examined in the current study, while semi-structured interview data provided insights into educators’ perspectives of factors that influence their relationships with children. In this way, observations and perspectives are combined to create an in depth presentation of the findings that specifically addresses RQ2.

In order to determine what factors influence educator-child relationships, educators’ perspectives on the definition of educator-child relationships were identified and are presented in the following section. A total of 14 factors that were derived from the demographic information, RRRRS, semi-structured interview and naturalistic observation data are presented within three distinct categories, identified in Table 4.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Factors</th>
<th>Child Characteristics</th>
<th>Educator Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time - ECEC attendance</td>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator-parent relationships</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine transition times</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-to-child ratios</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Mental wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>Training and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Educators’ perspectives on educator-child relationships

In order to provide a foundation to investigate educator-child relationships it was considered necessary to understand educators’ perspectives of the subject matter – educator-child relationships.
During the interviews, each educator was asked to articulate their perspective on the nature of educator-child relationships and what they entail. When educators were asked “How do you define your relationships with children?” they communicated that their relationships with children are based on love, care and trust. For example, typical educator responses included:

...A loving, caring bond, almost like a guardian. They rely on us, just as much as their parents (Emma, Setting 1)

...Trusting and caring bonds (Kim, Setting 1)

...It’s a loving relationship (Karen, Setting 2)

...Relationships with the children are about love, patience, trust and bonding (Nina, Setting 5).

Throughout the data collection period, naturalistic observations captured affectionate interactions between educators and children, as illustrated in Vignettes 4.38 and Vignette 4.39.

Vignette 4.38 Face to face

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 4</th>
<th>Child/ren: Steven</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Renee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven sat in Renee’s lap; face to face. He raised his arm to touch her face. She smiled widely and drew him in close and hugged him for several seconds. When the embrace ended, they both smiled at one another</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vignette 4.39 Teamwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Katrina</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim watched Katrina attempt to put her bib on. Katrina pulled at the bib for several seconds, and then threw the bib down. Kim retrieved the bib from the floor and handed it back to the child. Katrina attempted to put the bib on herself again. Kim offered minimal assistance, and Katrina had the bib on. <strong>Kim:</strong> See, you can do it! You’re so clever</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim smiled widely at the Katrina, and Katrina smiled back.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The observations above illustrate that the nature of some educator-child relationships are indicative of the way in which educators described them in the interviews – affectionate and loving bonds. As well as encapsulating the essence of educator-child relationships, educators also described the significance of these relationships on children’s learning and development.

...Relationships are critical to children’s learning and development... it’s one of the most important aspects of early childhood. Relationships here are important for the child to feel safe and secure... they make you and the child feel like you’re part of something special (Sophie, Setting 2).

... Our relationships with the kids form a part of their learning, because we give them confidence to explore and play (Nina, Setting 5)

Despite reporting the importance of educator-child relationships on children’s learning and wellbeing, many educators described that difficulties and obstacles were present in the educator-child relationships. For example, one educator stated

...With some children, relationships are easy to build and maintain, with others it’s hard. You don’t get along with every child, some just rub you the wrong way... it’s about personality - you don’t get along with everyone (Karen, Setting 2).

The findings from the naturalistic observations supported the notion that educator-child relationships can be strained in nature, as illustrated in Vignette 4.40 where one educator was observed to be visibly frustrated with a particular child.
Vignette 4.40 Eye-rolling encounter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Child/ren: Sam</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 1.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Karen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Karen looked down at Sam walking towards her. Sam was whimpering and attempting to reach for her leg. Karen rolled her eyes and walked away – Sam continued to pursue her.

The above example was typical of the interactions observed between this educator and child. It was found in the RRRRS data that their educator-child relationship level was low (1.8), and Karen described feelings of friction between the two, stating

... I don’t know what it is, but there is just some friction between us. Maybe it’s a lot of things, like his mum drives me crazy because she just babies him, so he acts sooky all the time, and I don’t respond well to that (Karen, Setting 2).

4.2.3 Factors that influence educator child relationships

To further investigate the complex nature of educator-child relationships, the researcher analysed the data from the demographic information, RRRRS, naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews. One of the foci of this analysis was informed by the literature (see Chapter 3) which provides insights into factors that influence educator-child relationships, including child gender, ECEC attendance per week and educators training and years of work experience in the ECEC field. Descriptive analysis and statistical testing was performed (using the RRRRS and demographic data) in order to determine if they were found to influence the educator-child relationships within the current study. These findings are presented in the following sections of the current chapter.
Furthermore, thematic analysis of the naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews was performed, revealing 14 themes that addressed the research issue and specifically responded to RQ2. Initially, a word frequency was performed on the semi-structured interview transcripts, which identified the most commonly used words in the interview, which served to inform the themes created from the interview data. Table 4.5 illustrates the word frequency result of the interview data, which identifies each factor articulated by educators as influencing educator-child relationships (for example, time, trust, responsiveness and so forth), the percentage of educators (N = 10) that identified this factor, and how frequently this factor was discussed by educators throughout all interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor described by educators</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Word frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive/ness</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood (Mental wellbeing)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff to child ratios</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine transition times</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Naturalistic observations were also scrutinised to develop common themes. The data derived from these observations was found to both support and refute other collected data, and is therefore embedded within each factor presented.

It is important to note that responsiveness and interactions (identified in Table 4.4) were both found to be factors that influence the educator-child
relationship within the RRRRS, naturalistic observations and interview data, however these factors were presented in RQ1 (see section 4.2). In this case, please refer to section 4.2.3 for the presentation of the responsiveness findings, and refer to section 4.2.4 for the presentation of the positive interactions findings.

4.2.3.1 External factors influencing relationships

External factors were considered to be factors separate from the educator or child, or a combination of educator and child characteristics. For example, how many days per week children attend the ECEC setting is not something children or educators are contributing to the relationship, therefore it is an external factor. Data informing how the identified external factors were found to influence the educator-child relationship are presented below.

4.2.3.1.1 Time - Attendance in ECEC settings per week

In order to determine if the number of days per week children attended their ECEC setting was a factor that influenced relationship levels, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of ECEC setting attendance on levels of educator-child relationships, as measured by the RRRRS. Children’s ECEC setting attendance ranged from 1 day per week to 5 days per week, and were grouped accordingly (Group 1: 1 day per week; Group 2: 2 days per week; Group 3: 3 days per week; Group 4: 4 days per week; Group 5: 5 days per week). There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in RRRRS and ECEC attendance scores within the five groups: $F (4, 87) = 3.4, p = .01$. The results found that the effect size was medium (eta squared .013).

To further analyse the difference between ECEC attendance and educator-child relationships levels using the RRRRS, a Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey
HSD test was undertaken. Findings indicated that the mean score for groups 3 (M = 3.78, SD = .50) and 4 (M = 3.83, SD .56) was significantly different from group 1 (M = 3.23, SD .73). Groups 2 (3.45, SD .61) and 5 (M = .64, SD .84) did not differ significantly from other groups (see figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: The influence of the number of day’s children attended the ECEC setting on educator-child relationship levels, as measured by the RRRRS

These findings revealed that children attending ECEC settings 3 and 4 days per week experienced higher levels of relationships than those children who attended for only 1 day per week. It is important to note the mean level for those children attending ECEC setting 1, 2 and 5 days per week was lower, but is still considered a satisfactory RRRRS level (DECS, 2008). These findings suggest that children attending ECEC settings three or four days per week have a higher educator-child relationship level, however regardless of the amount of days per week children attended ECEC setting, a satisfactory relationship was attained.

Findings from the interview data also showed that all educators (n = 10) believe that the more days children attended ECEC per week, the better the educator-child. The following four example were typical perspective articulated by educators:
...I think your full timers are easier to form a bond with (Kim, Setting 1)

...The more time you have with them, the better it is for our bond (Julie, Setting 2)

...You spend more time with the full timers than you do with your own family... out of necessity you cling to them because they have become an important part of your life... you just tend to have an easier time interacting with them and bonding (Sophie, Setting 2)

...The ones I am closest with are here four or five days a week. I just know them so well (Renee, Setting 4)

...The full time kids obviously you get to know better...that strengthens your connection, your relationships (Nina, Setting 5)

It was also evident that the relationships held with children who only attended the ECEC setting 1 day per week were not as strong, due to the lack of time educators felt they had to connect and interact with a child, evident in the three comments below

...It’s really hard with the one day a week kid sometimes; you just don’t get to know them as well (Sophie, Setting 2)

...The one-day kids... I think it’s really hard to form a bond with them... it’s hard to find the time to get to know them (Kate, Setting 1)

...With the one day kids it’s not as natural... they aren’t as familiar with me or me with them, so it can be a bit superficial (Renee, Setting 4)

4.2.3.1.2 Educator-parent relationship

All educators (N = 10) spoke of the important role educator-parent relationships play in getting to know a child. Educators articulated that the parents had unique insights into their child, and that some of that information supported the development of educator-child relationships, for example, one educator noted that
... The more information the parents give us, the more we know each other, and that makes a strong connection (Julie, Setting 2)

Many educators (n = 5) went further, elaborating on the type of relationship they have with the parent, and how this in turn may have a negative influence on the relationship they have with the child, for example

...I find if parent are challenging, its can make it hard (to have a strong relationship with the child)... I try not to let it affect the relationship have with the child (Kim, Setting 1)

...It’s the parent’s attitude... that can impact of the relationship with (children) (Julie, Setting 2)

...Sometimes, if you can’t get along with the parent it can impact on how you get along with their child (Carla, Setting 3)

...If the parents are hard, like if they are rude, it’s hard to connect with that child (Kate, Setting 4)

...If the parents are... rude or nasty, it makes it hard for us to connect with them and sometimes their child (Nina, Setting 5)

Considering the above examples, educators’ perspectives revealed that educator-child relationships could be fractured due to a negative educator-parent relationship. For example, if an educator does not get along with the parent, then in turn they may not get along with the child. There were two educators, however, that claimed the relationship they held with the parent would not negatively impact on their relationship with that child:

...I have some parents who don’t talk to me but I still get on really well with their child... I don’t let it affect my relationship with the child (Valarie, Setting 3)
...If I didn’t get along with a parent I would never take it out on a child
(Renee, Setting 4)

The comments derived from the interview data suggest if educators’ relationship with parents is positive, it may have a positive influence on the educator-child relationship. When educators had a good relationship with parents, they claimed to know more about the child due to open dialogue. This was observed when educators appeared to have a pre-existing and familiar relationship with the parent (n = 14), an example of which can be seen in Vignette 4.41:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.41 Educator-parent pre-existing connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee was talking to a parent who had arrived to collect her child from the ECEC setting. The conversation lasted over ten minutes, with the child included sporadically throughout. They were discussing events from the weekend, in which Renee described ‘missing’ Harper, who did not attend the event. This conversation continued, and the child was discussed sporadically throughout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above Vignette provides an example of the nature of the educator-child relationship when it is positive. The child was discussed during the conversation, and feelings of appreciation and warmth were directed between the educator and parent, and towards the child. There were some instances where it was clear that educators did not have a positive educator-parent relationship. This was not evident in the educator-parent interaction observed, but rather in the discussions educators would have with one another about the parent. For example, Vignette 4.42 presents a script of a discussion held between two educators where a parent was discussed, in front on the children.
### Vignette 4.42 Educators discuss a parent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 2</th>
<th>Child/ren: N/A</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Karen &amp; Julie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Karen:** I heard that she left her job, so I don’t even know why she brings him to day care.

**Julie:** Probably so she can go out for lunch and get her hair done and pretend she doesn’t have kids (both educators laugh)

**Karen:** Well I don’t know why she bothered to have kids, honestly’

**Julie:** It’s not fair on him at all – how hard is it to spend time with you child?

This conversation was indicative of some educators (n = 3), directed at particular parents. Other conversations between educators about parents were observed as being positive, for example:

“She is an amazing mum, I don’t know how she does it!” (Kim, Setting 1)

“I saw Beth at the footy last week with Tommy – they are such a nice family” (Nina, Setting 5)

Regardless of the nature of the educator-parent relationship, educators seemed to have exceptional insight into parents’ home lives, and therefore had insight into the child’s home life.

#### 4.2.3.1.3 Routine transition times

Routine transition times are evident in all ECEC settings, and were observed to be occurring constantly throughout the data collection period (every 20-30-minutes). These routine transition times include toileting, mealtimes, sleep times and play times. Typically, routine transition times were predetermined, as outlined in the format outlined in Table 4.6.
Table 4.6: ECEC daily routine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nappy changes/toileting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nappy changes/toileting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nappy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afternoon tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nappy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above outline of routine transition times was found in the ECEC settings (N = 5). Each routine transition time was not far apart in time and on average, the children and educators were moving through transition periods roughly every 30 minutes. During these routine transition times, educators would be responsible for preparing for the next transition, while also finalising the current routine. In this case, educators were observed as being distracted and unavailable to children during routine transition times. Two educators discussed the hindrance that routine transition times imposed on their time with children in the semi-structured interviews:

...The younger age there is so much demand, they need bottles and bed and comfort and stimulation ... it’s just so hard at times (Carla, Setting 3)

... We are always very busy, a day in the baby rooms goes by in a second because of all the transition times. We are always on the move, we have to
be. If we didn’t have to be up and about all the time we could spend more time with the children, but then nothing would get done (Kim, Setting 1).

Overall, routine transition times were observed as being one of the major restrictions on educators’ ability to create sustained interactions with children, and well as limiting their ability to respond promptly and in meaningful ways to children’s needs. One such example is illustrated in Vignette 4.43, where one educator’s attention was consumed by the routine transition period, resulting in her being unaware of a child’s bids for attention:

| Setting: 3 | Child/ren: Lee | RRRRS Level: 2.6 |
| Time: PM | Educator: Carla |

It was late in the day, and Carla had three children remaining in the room (awaiting collection from their parents). Carla methodically packed up the room, washing toys and making beds for the next day. Lee was standing beside the toy trolley, watching Carla. He smiles at here and banged a toy on the trolley. Carla continued to make the beds. Lee continued to watch Carla and banged the toy down again, laughing. Carla did not look up from the beds she was making. Lee moved away from the trolley.

The above example shows that some particular transition periods would influence how responsive educators could be to children’s social bids and needs. Educators’ tendency to maintain structure and move children through transition times promptly was seemingly influencing the educator-child relationships, in that educators’ attention was not on children during those particular times. One educator described this in the interview

... We have to keep on top of our routines, minute by minute, otherwise there would be chaos (Renee, Setting 4)
4.2.3.1.4 Staff-to-child ratios

Staff-to-child ratios were lowered in the birth to 3 years age group in Australian ECEC settings in 2012 (ACECQA, 2013b), as a way to raise quality ECEC. During the interviews, educators (n = 5) mentioned that since the introduction of the new ratios, they have been able to spend more one on one time with the children, increasing the quality of their relationships. Typical comments that illustrate this view are evident in the following three statements:

...It means we can spend more quality time with each child (Valarie, Setting 3)

...It gives you more time to spend with each child when the ratios are lower, so obviously then you get to know the child better and build a stronger relationship (Renee, Setting 4)

...It’s amazing what a difference it made. Of course our relationships are better, because we can spend more time with them. We know them a bit better, and play with them more. That’s when you make those good connections (Nina, Setting 5)

While noting that lowering the staff to child ratios has made a positive difference to educator-child relationships, it was also mentioned that lowering them further would be even more beneficial to the quality of educator-child relationships, as illustrated in the following two comments:

...I think in the younger age group it’s hard to be responsive because the ratios just don’t allow it. Those children need more attention, some need more than others, so it does leave other children out who aren’t as needy (Emma, Setting 1)

...It would be great to have ratios as 1 staff to 3 children, in an ideal world... it just allows for so much more quality interactions and quality time with the kids... that will mean better relationships (Sophie, Setting 2)
4.2.3.2  *Child characteristics*

Children’s unique personal characteristics contribute to the educator-child relationships in a bi-directional manner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this section, data segregated into the ‘child characteristic’ category will be presented. A total of 5 factors are the focus of this section, including: 1) temperament; 2) behaviour; 3) trust; 4) gender and 5) vulnerability. Data informing each of these factors will now be presented.

4.2.3.2.1  *Temperament*

Similarly linked with a child’s personality, educators’ perspectives gave credit to a child’s temperament as influencing the educator-child relationship. When educators (N = 10) were discussing temperament, it appeared to go hand in hand with personality, and was considered the foundation of educator-child relationships, for example

...Their temperament is all we really have to go off with the relationship (Nina, Setting 5)

While temperament is an important factor that can be considered difficult to define, there were distinctions that were identified by educators in the current study. Some educators (n = 2) suggested that children with an ‘placid’ temperament, defined as being quiet and agreeable, were easier to form relationships with, as illustrated in the comments below:

...It’s easier to form relationships with placid children (Julie, Setting 2)

...I find it easier to get on with placid kids (Valarie, Setting 3)
Conversely, other educators \((n = 2)\) claimed that children with placid temperaments were easy to overlook, thereby making it harder to form strong relationships, for example:

...The ones who have a quiet temperament you tend to overlook, because you don’t hear from them (Karen, Setting 2)

...He is just so shy and quiet you forget he is there... they might be a bit more withdrawn so it’s harder to connect with them in any real way (Sophie, Setting 2).

Other educators \((n = 3)\) articulated that their own temperament will influence how they respond to children’s temperament, for example

...We all have our own temperament... that’s how we connect to people (Emma, Setting 1)

...Similar temperaments... you tend to gravitate towards people who are similar to you (Renee, Setting 4)

...So I guess it’s about matching temperaments (Nina, Setting 5)

Based on educators’ perspectives found in the interview data, it would appear that different educators find relationships are better with children of the same temperament, therefore no one temperament was identified as the easiest to have a quality relationship with. Commonly agreed upon, however, was that children who are challenging, noted as having a ‘grumpy’ temperament, are the most difficult to have a positive relationships with, as articulated by two educators:

...The ones who are a bit more grumpy or angry or sad, that’s much harder. It takes a long time to bond with them – if you ever can (Carla, Setting 3)

... If they are upset all the time, and crying and nothing you do helps, it is hard to connect to them (Kate, Setting 4)
Based on the interview data, it can be stated that educators consider temperament and personality to have a similar influence over educator-child relationships. One educator articulated this notion quite eloquently, stating that

...Their temperament guides how we treat them to begin with, and their personality is how we connect with them (Kim, Setting 1)

This idea was a shared belief amongst all educators. While educators did not uniformly put forth a particular temperament as being key to a positive educator-child relationship, they all (N = 10) suggested that a child’s temperament was a major influence in the educator-child relationship.

It should be noted that while found to be a factor that influences relationships, children’s individual temperament type was not measured or analysed in the current study. As a result, educators’ perspectives of the nature and influence of temperament on the educator-child relationship is what informs this research.

4.2.3.2.2 Behaviour

The interview data revealed that all educators (N = 10) consider the child’s behaviour as having an influence on the educator-child relationship. It was suggested by some educators (n = 3) that children who require more staff intervention, because of safety reasons regarding risk taking play and boisterous behaviour, translated into more time spent with that child and therefore stronger relationships. Often these types of children were described as ‘hard’ or ‘difficult’, but educators (n = 3) noted in the interviews that they can still establish a positive relationship with these children, due to the amount of time they spent together. The following three statements provide a representation of this perspective
...The relationships are probably better with the harder ones, only because you spend more time with them and get to know them (Karen, Setting 2)

...It’s always the boisterous ones... you do tend to spend more time with them for safety reasons and guiding their behaviour (Julie, Setting 2)

...You spend more time with the difficult ones because you’re trying to settle them, and it makes you closer (Carla, Setting 3)

An example that illustrates the additional time spent across the day with children who exhibit extreme attachment behaviours is presented in Vignette 4.44.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 3</th>
<th>Child/ren: Victor</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM/PM</td>
<td>Educator: Valarie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vignette 4.44 Proximity seeking attachment behaviours

Victor was observed having trouble settling into the ECEC setting from drop-off. Victor exhibited attachment behaviours including crying, clinging and following, specifically directed at Valarie. Valarie maintained proximity with Victor for the entire day, often sitting him on her lap or carrying him in her arms. When she was not engaged with the child, he was trying to re-establish proximity through attachment behaviours.

The educator in the above example made a comment about Victor’s behaviour on that day, which was noted by the researcher and presented as follows:

... He has good days and bad days, and when he has a day like this I just have to spend that extra time with him, because that’s what he needs (Valarie, Setting 3)

While educators did seem to spend a lot of time with children who required more intervention, the levels of conflict that were observed between educators and children during intervention periods were present when aggressive behaviours were observed, as illustrated in Vignette 4.45:
Adam had thrown a block at Jake, and Jake started to cry loudly. Kate walked over to the boys.

Kate: What happened here?
Jake: He threw it at me (crying)
Kate: Did you through this block at Jake? (looking at Adam)
Adam: He had my block!
Kate: Adam, you need to move away from Jake. We do not throw things at each other, can’t you see you’ve really hurt him? Move over there and play.
Adam: No!
Kate: Adam, move over there now or I will have to get your bed out for you to rest on.
Adam: No!
Kate took Adams hand and walked him across the room.
Kate: You stay here and play. I’m very sad that you’ve hurt Jake.
Kate returned to comfort Jake.

In the above example, conflict was evident in the interaction between Kate and Adam, as they raised their voices to one another. When interactions such as this occurred between educators and children, although time was being spent between the pair, it was not of a nature that could be considered to facilitate a positive educator-child relationship.

Furthermore, externalised (such as physical aggression) and internalised behaviours (such as withdrawal) exhibited by children were found to evoke different responses from educators (harsh or nurturing). Figure 4.4 provides a visual description of some words that educators assigned to children’s internalised and externalised behaviours that either contributed to a positive or negative relationship:
Responses from the interviews showed that educators (N = 10) believed that children’s behaviour had an influence on their feelings and towards a child, and therefore impacted on their relationship with that child. Specifically, undesirable and aggressive behaviour was the type discussed as having a negative impact on educator-child relationships, two examples of these type of comments are presented below:

...challenging behaviours have an impact... I don’t like biters (Kim, Setting 1)

...when you’re bitten and hit by a child a few times a day... and when they hurt other children. It’s hard to get over that, and it affects the relationships you have with them (Emma, Setting 1)

The above two examples describe externalised behaviours that were considered to have a negative impact on the environment, other children and educators. In turn, they were described as having a negative influence on the educator-child relationship, as the educator would harbor negative feelings towards the child, and these feeling would elicit negative responsiveness.
Similarly, negative internalised behaviours were also described as having a negative impact on the educator-child relationship. As mentioned previously, when children are considered to be withdrawn, the relationship is described as ‘difficult’ to develop. The following example illustrates typical educator perspectives in relation to internalised behavioural problems exhibited by children:

... When the child doesn’t behave the way you want them to or sulks that makes a negative relationship ... you actually resent the child being there for the day (Carla, Setting 3).

One educator elaborated further and described feeling anxious when awaiting particular children’s arrival:

... There are some kids that I actually think in my head ‘please don’t come today, please don’t come today’. I know that’s awful, but having them here just changes the dynamic of the room ... some just have a negative energy that I don’t like because it brings everyone down (Carla, Setting 3).

The semi-structured interviews revealed that negative behaviours, internalised or externalised, adversely impact on the educator-child relationship. In particular, physical aggressive behaviours, that educators described as situations where a child is hurting other children and/or educators, causes educators to have negative feelings towards the child, thereby eliciting feelings of resentment and frustration.

The naturalistic observations provided further insights into ‘behaviour’ as a factor that influences relationships. Vignette 4.46 illustrates one educator showing frustration with a child’s physical aggression directed towards another child, and eventually directed towards the educator. The response delivered by the educator
shows the conflict that can ensue between child and educator when negative
behaviours are present in the ECEC setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.46 Aggressive behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRRRS Level (Clifford): 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clifford and Bruce were playing with the toys on the mat, when Bruce squealed loudly and started crying. Julie walked over to the children from the reading mat.

**Julie:** What happened here?

Julie examined the children and noticed something on Bruce’s arm.

**Julie:** Did you pinch him, Clifford? You do not hurt our friends.

Julie’s tone was stern, and she lifted Bruce and moved him to another play space, then returned to the reading mat.

Several minutes later, Bruce cried out again, and Julie walked over quickly to him. Clifford was next to Bruce.

**Julie:** Oh my god, you did it again! That’s not ok, Clifford! You need to move right away if you can’t play nicely with the other children.

Julie lifted Clifford off the floor and started to walk him to another section of the room. Clifford started to hit Julie, and squirmed in her arms.

**Julie:** That’s enough! You can’t hurt people, that’s very naughty! You stay here now.

Julie put Clifford on the ground abruptly, and he swayed slightly before gaining balance. Julie walked away and told the other educator about the interaction.

**Julie:** He’s doing my head in today. Did you see what he did? I’ve had enough.

The above example was indicative of educators’ typical responses to outwardly aggressive behaviours from children, when directed towards another child. There were no conflicts observed between educators and children who exhibited negative internalised behaviours.

Educators would also exhibit frustration when children exhibited undesirable behaviours towards them, as shown in Vignette 4.47, where a child’s externalised behaviour was not responded to by the educator, but rather ignored:
The above example demonstrated the frustration of the educator, who had made an attempt to stop the child’s undesirable behaviour. It was commonly found that educators would remove themselves from the child’s presence, as a strategy to deal with their behaviour, however this disengagement did not provide a solution to the undesired behaviour. Most often, it was found that attempts to guide children’s behaviour were either limited, or controlling in nature. A directive approach would be taken, and when the child would not listen to the educators’ direction they were physically removed from the situation by the educator – sometimes this was carried out with slight force (listing children from the ground by their arm, or placing children roughly on the ground when repositioned).

Educators had different pedagogical approaches to dealing with undesirable behavior, and supporting or redirecting children’s behavior. Some educators (n = 5) would address the behavioural issue using a guidance approach, which involved a lot of discussion between the educator and child involved, an example of which can be seen in Section 4.2.4.8, in Vignette 4.25. When educators would take on a guidance approach, they would employ tactics such as using ‘I messages’ and engage children in meaningful discussions regarding their behavior. When educators (n = 5) were observed using a controlling approach, they would direct the child’s behavior through specific instructions, such as “don’t do that” or “put it down and move
away”, and enforce limits with threats of punishment, such as “if you don’t eat your lunch you won’t get fruit”. This type of controlling approach was seen to elicit conflict between the child and educator, which could be observed during and shortly after the intervention of behaviour.

4.2.3.2.3 Trust

During the interviews, most educators (n = 8) articulated that trust established between educators and children influences educator-child relationships. It was said by educators that before relationships developed, the child must feel trust towards the educator. The onus of developing this trust was said to fall on the educator, who must provide responsive and consistent care and positive interactions throughout the day in order to earn children’s trust. Some examples of such comments are presented below:

...You have to have their trust. That they know they can come to you and are comfortable with you and you listen to them (Karen, Setting 2)

...They learn they can trust us, and that’s how we make bonds (Carla, Setting 3)

... Children want to come here when they know us and trust us (Valarie, Setting 3)

The internal mechanisms of the trust described focused on educators proving to children that they would be kind, caring and supportive of the child’s need. It was communicated by one educator that trust was built over time, and that educators could lose children’s trust just as easily as it was built:

... It takes time to build trust, because you have to show them time and time again that you’ll be there for them. That you’re going to be the one to give them what they need. Once you have that trust, we have formed a trusting
relationship. But we have to keep going. If we break that trust if we stop responding to them in the ways they need, or expect, then they can lose trust in us, and that damages the relationships quickly (Kate, Setting 4).

Another educator described a nurturing element to developing trust with children, in that affection must be shared between the two:

... You know when you have their trust, they are much more affectionate with you. They trust that you care about them (Renee, Setting 4)

Examples of this type of affection were observed by the researcher, and presented in Vignette 4.18 and Vignette 4.38.

Positive interactions were also mentioned as a component of trust forming between educators and children, however the quantitative data found positive interactions between educators and children to be a low scoring signal in the RRRRS (M = 2.97). While trust was not measured in the current study, educators’ perspectives indicate that it is an important factor that influences educator-child relationships.

4.2.3.2.4 Gender

Past research presented in Chapter 2 had found that gender plays a role in the educator-child relationship, and so the current study investigated this factor within the sample. An independent samples t test was conducted to compare the RRRRS level for males and females. There was no significant difference between scores for males (M = 3.55, SD = .69) or females (M = 3.65, SD = .60; t (90) = -.72, p = .47, two-tailed). The magnitude in the means (mean difference = -.10, 95% CI: -.36 to .17) was very small (eta squared = 0.005).
The findings showed no difference between the child’s gender and educator-child relationship levels were found in the RRRRS data was further supported in the semi-structured interviews, as no educator considered gender to influence the educator-child relationship in the birth to 3 years age group. For example, typical responses from educators included:

...I don’t think (gender) impacts on my relationship with them (Emma, Setting 1)

...(Gender) doesn’t make a difference at all (Julie, Setting 2)

...I don’t think gender has anything to do with it (Valarie, Setting 3)

It was, however, mentioned that in the older age group, gender does become an influencing factor on educator-child relationships

...(Gender) doesn’t really come into relationships in this age group. In the older age group it does (Kate, Setting 4)

... with babies you don’t see any gender specific behaviours yet, so it isn’t really an issue for our relationships (Nina, Setting 5)

Overall, the collective perspective held amongst educators in the sample was that in the birth to 3 years age group, gender specific traits are not as evident and therefore was not considered a factor that influenced educator-child relationships, which was evidenced in the RRRRS data.

4.2.3.2.5 Vulnerability

Vulnerable children were described by educators’ (n = 4) during the interviews as children who experience neglect, poverty or abuse. Two educators noted that they believe that when children are coming from homes where neglect or undesirable parenting may be an issue, it impacts upon their relationship with the
child. This was discussed from different perspectives, one being that vulnerable children who come from neglectful homes are less appealing due to their cleanliness, for example:

...If they are not very clean, like when they arrive you don’t want to touch them until you’ve bathed them, and you have to wear gloves when you go into their bags (Emma, Setting 1)

...Department of Human Service families... I’ve had kids come in, babies, that are obviously dirty with dirty clothes on (Nina, Setting 5)

Another perspectives was that children who have experienced neglect or abuse are more challenging due to foundation traits, such as the establishment of trust. Furthermore, educator-parents relationship may be strained, which may impact on the amount of information educators have to work on building an informed educator child relationship. Example of these comments during the interviews are provided in the following two examples:

...Department of Human Services children can be challenging. It’s hard to build relationships in that case, like most times they’ve had a hard start to life and I guess they can have trust issues from that. And getting information from their family isn’t really an option, especially if they have foster carers who keep changing. It’s almost like they don’t have any environmental norms you can cater to, like what’s normal for them that we can put out to make them comfortable? And we don’t know what they’ve done on the weekend (Kim, Setting 1)

... I’ll ask when their last bottle was and the mum says ‘I don’t remember’... It just makes it hard (Nina, Setting 5)

Based on the interview data, it appeared that being unwilling to be physically close to a child (due to uncleanliness) seems to influence the quality of the educator-child relationship, as does the lack of family background information.
In keeping with ethical consideration, children who were considered vulnerable were not included in the research sample, by design. Respectively, no observations between educators and vulnerable children were recorded in the current study, and so educator perspectives derived from the interview data is the only insight offered to inform this factor as an influence on the educator-child relationship.

4.2.3.3 Educator characteristics

Educator’s unique personal characteristics contribute to the educator-child relationships in a bi-directional manner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this section, data segregated into the ‘educator characteristic’ category will be presented. A total of 5 factors are the focus of this section, including: 1) responsiveness; 2) interactions; 3) personality; 4) mental wellbeing; and 5) training and work experience. As previously mentioned, it is responsiveness and interactions were presented in RQ1 (see section 4.2). In this case, please refer to section 4.2.3 for the presentation of the responsiveness findings, and refer to section 4.2.4 for the presentation of the positive interactions findings. Data informing factors 1-5 will now be presented.

4.2.3.3.1 Personality

All educators (N = 10) suggested that personality influenced the educator-child relationship, both their own and the child’s. Examples of this can be seen in the comments below:

... In my experience it’s about personality (Emma, Setting 1)

... Different personality types attract your attention (Sophie, Setting 2)

... Personality. That is the key (Valarie, Setting 3)
... You can get personality clashes... maybe we rub each other the wrong way, or they don’t like me or vice versa (Nina, Setting 5)

Extending further on the idea of personality playing a role in educator-child relationships, it was suggested that it is not simply a matter of identifying educators’ and children’s personality, but that matching these personalities is a key component for positive educator-child relationships. Some comments that highlight this perspective are as follows:

... If two people don’t get along, it’s because their personalities don’t match up (Emma, Setting 1)

... You might connect with some better if you have similar interests or personalities (Kim, Setting 1)

... I have a big personality, so I am attracted to the kids who are big and bubbly and fun, whereas Denise is really quiet and she tends to be closer with the shy kids (Kate, Setting 4)

It was also stated that while a child’s personality has a significant impact on educator-child relationships, individual personality types are something that neither party has complete control over, for example:

...It comes down to personality... things we have no control over (Carla, Setting 3)

However, it was suggested that acknowledgement of various different types of personality is an area where the educator needs to make an effort, in order to engage with each child’s specific personality, as they have the life skills required to adapt. As one educator noted

...I am the one who can adapt my behaviour to suit the need of any child (Kate, Setting 4)
It should be noted that while personality was found to be a factor that influences educator-child relationships, educators’ individual personality type was not measured or analysed in the current study. As a result, educators’ perspectives of the nature and influence of personality on the educator-child relationship is what informs this research.

4.2.3.3.2 Mental wellbeing

Educators’ mental wellbeing, including mood and feelings of depression, have been identified by previous research as impacting upon educator-child relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Kaplan et al., 2004). During the interviews, it was suggested by some educators (n = 5) that their mood and mental stability impacted on their relationships with children. One educator stated that she has a pre-existing mental illness (depression), and she described this to have an impact on her emotional and physical availability to the children

... I suffer from depression, but I try not to let it affect work. It still does sometimes; sometimes I just can’t be there for them. I know when I’m fragile and sometimes I have to leave the room to pull myself together. Sometimes I just get overwhelmed (Emma, Setting 1)

Also, how well the educator can respond to the child, and the quality of educator-child interactions was discussed as being influenced by the mood of the educator. Some examples of these comments are presented below

... It probably depends on what mood I’m in as well... it comes through in my interactions (Karen, Setting 2)

...It’s what you bring into the room, into the environment. If you are not stable and happy and healthy, or if you’re having a stressful day, the kids know (Valarie, Setting 3)
If you’re grumpy, stressed and short tempered, if you dismiss them or are harsh with them, they will react to that. That will cause friction between you and the children and of course then your relationships with them won’t be positive (Carla, Setting 3)

...If I am stressed out they pick up on that (Kate, Setting 4)

The above comments were in reference to having a negative mindset or mood, and were suggested as having a harmful influence on educator-child relationships. Educators’ moods were not assessed throughout the data collection period any measurable way, and so observations between educator and children that could shed further light on this factor could not be offered with any certainty that they pertained to the mood of the educator.

4.2.3.3.3 Educators’ training and work experience in ECEC

Educators’ experience working in the ECEC field was taken into consideration, and was found to be a non-significant explanatory variable when it came to educator-child relationships. An independent-samples t-test was performed using the RRRRS and demographic data, in order to compare the influence of educators’ years of work experience on educator-child relationships. Educator-child pairs were divided into two groups, according to educators’ years of experience working in the field (Group 1: up to 8 years; Group 2: 9 years and above). There was no significant difference between Group 1 (M =3.43, SD = .58) and Group 2 (M = 3.69, SD = .67; t (90) = -1.85, p = .60, two-tailed). The magnitude in the means (mean difference = -.26, 95% CI: -.53 to .02) was very small (eta squared = 0.036). Furthermore, educators did not discuss years of work experience as a factor that influences relationships during the interviews.
When asked about training in ECEC (such as professional development training), no educators could recall having specific training that focused on educator-child relationships during their career, nor on attachment. Furthermore, some educators (n = 4) stated during the interview that their qualification training (Diploma), was very general in relation to child development, without a strong focus on the birth to 3 years age group. The following two examples illustrate typical responses by educators

... The Diploma was pretty general I think. I got a lot of know about child development, but overall, from birth to 8 (Kim, Setting 1)

... In the Diploma they didn’t focus on specific age groups, we just learnt about child development as a whole. I don’t remember focusing on relationships (Nina, Setting 5)

The above examples suggest that the Diploma training undertaken by educators in the current study encompassed general training in child development, without specific focus on the birth to 3 years age, or educator-child relationships.

4.2.4 Summary of RQ2 findings

The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data revealed a myriad of factors (n = 14), segregated into three categories, that influence relationships between educators and children to varying degrees, presented in Table 4.7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Factors</th>
<th>Child Characteristics</th>
<th>Educator Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time - ECEC attendance</td>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator-parent relationships</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition times</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-to-child ratios</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Mental wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>Work experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings will be compared and contrasted with previous literature, and discussed for their impact on ECEC quality with children birth to 3 years old, in Chapter 5.

4.3 RQ3 – What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

4.3.1 Aim

Research question three aimed to provide a description of children’s wellbeing by measuring children’s behaviours and interactions within the environment, to identify an overall wellbeing level of the sample. The Reflect Respect Relate Wellbeing Scale (RRRW) was used to measure the wellbeing levels of 92 children birth to 3 years old, in their ECEC setting. Additionally, the naturalistic observations provided insights that served to inform this research questions.

The RRRWS focused on three signals: 1) happiness and satisfaction; 2) social functioning; and 3) dispositions. Within these signals, 55 indicators of wellbeing are segregated into 12 factors. Across the six x 5-minute observations that were undertaken on each child (30 minutes in totally per child), separated by time and place, a mean score was calculated for each child using the RRRWS rating sheet, thereby giving the child a total score between 1 to 5. Table 4.8 presents the definition of each educator-child relationship level that could be attained, as described by the RRRWS.
Table 4.8: RRRWS rating descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non supportive</td>
<td>Emotionally uncomfortable, displays of negative symptoms e.g. crying, hurting, withdrawn, unhappy, tense, easily overwhelmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Seldom displays enjoyment, signs of level 1 about half the time, alternating with neutral and some positive signals, may take pleasure in disrespectful ways e.g. hurting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non supportive</td>
<td>Occasional signs of emotional discomfort, generally appears ‘quite happy’, reasonable self-confidence and enjoyment without intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Generally happy with few signs of emotional discomfort, adequately succeeds in meeting and regulating their own needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Totally supportive</td>
<td>High levels of trust and confidence. Initiates positive connections with others, radiates vitality and self-esteem, shows initiative, curiosity and pleasure in activities; receptive, communicative, self-guided and flexible, lots of positive interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Individual child levels of wellbeing were pooled together in order to examine the mean wellbeing level of the entire research sample (n = 92).

4.3.2 Child wellbeing level

Descriptive analysis revealed that across the whole sample, children’s average wellbeing level was 4.5 (M = 4.5, n = 92). As the minimum acceptable level using the RRRWS is 3.5, the results indicate that in the regional context of this research, children from birth to 3, on average, are generally happy, had moderate to high levels of trust and confidence, and positive interactions with others were occurring (DECS, 2008). Wellbeing levels this high are certainly considered above satisfactory levels by the standards of DECS (2008). This finding was consistent with observations made during the data collection period.

At this level, wellbeing is defined as “mainly supportive”. A further breakdown of what this means in terms of children wellbeing is that they are
... generally happy with few signs of emotional discomfort, generally appears quite happy, reasonable self-confidence and enjoyment without intensity (DECS, 2008, pg. 72).

Mainly supportive levels of wellbeing such as these indicate that children in the sample are experience above satisfactory levels of wellbeing, as described by the three signals. While these findings are showing a considerably high level of wellbeing present amongst the sample, there is still room for these levels to increase even further.

Within the sample, there were some children who found between the 2.8 to 3.5 level (n = 10), which is below the satisfactory level. These levels describe children’s wellbeing as “mainly non-supportive” (DECS, 2008, p. 72). Children who are found with this level of wellbeing are described as

... seldom displays enjoyment, signs of level 1 about half the time, alternating with neutral and some positive signs, may take pleasure in disrespectful ways e.g. hurting others (DECS, 2008, p. 72).

In contrast, there were a number of children who were found to have very high relationship levels with their educators (n = 27), with a wellbeing level of 5. This level of wellbeing is considered “totally supportive” (DECS, 2008, p. 72), and can be described as

... High levels of trust and confidence. Initiates positive connections with others, radiates vitality and self-esteem, shows initiative, curiosity and pleasure in activities; receptive, communicative, self-guided and flexible, lots of positive interactions (DECS, 2008, p. 72).
Examples of these supportive levels of wellbeing were observed several times during the data collection period, and some of this data is presented in sections 4.4.3 (happiness and satisfaction), 4.4.4 (social functioning) and 4.4.5 (dispositions).

Further analysis of the data was undertaken to examine how the three signals of wellbeing were influencing total wellbeing levels amongst the sample. Findings revealed that the happiness and satisfaction signal, and the disposition signals were having the most positive influence on levels of wellbeing. Table 4.9 provides a breakdown of these findings that illustrates how the total levels of wellbeing were influenced by the three signals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RRRWS Signals</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness &amp; satisfaction</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social functioning</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositions</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total RRRRS level</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Signals and the total of the RRRWS are scored between 0 - 5

These results show that there is no significant variation between these three signals, and so each are considered to be contributing equally to the overall levels of children’s wellbeing found in the current study.

Further analysis of these results were undertaking using data from the semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of children’s wellbeing. Specially, the subheadings of each signal (rather than the indicators) will be deconstructed, with data used to provide insight and understanding into the research question. The indicators that
were observed within the subheadings of each signal will be included in the presentation of data.

4.3.2.1 **Happiness and satisfaction**

The RRRWS data (M = 4.57), semi-structured interview and naturalistic observation data were combined in a complimentary fashion by merging the data to describe children’s levels of wellbeing from the signal of *happiness and satisfaction*. Naturalistic observations provided the most insight into this signal, as the semi-structured interviews focused on the educator-child relationship, with wellbeing considered the outcome of these relationships. These findings are presented within each 5 factors of the *happiness and satisfaction* signal outlined in the RRRWS (DECS, 2008), including:

1. Confidence and self esteem
2. Sense of self
3. Vitality
4. Enjoyment, sense of humour
5. Ability to rest and relax

4.3.2.1.1 **Confidence, self esteem**

Children exert confidence when they feel safe and secure in their environment, and have a sense of trust in their primary caregiver (Dolby, 2007). This indicator was measured by observing children’s exploration and certainty in their actions. In the birth-to-2 room, evidence of children’s confidence and self-esteem was gathered by observing children’s behaviours and engagement with their environment, and with their peers and educators. Indicative of the birth to 2 years group, solitary and parallel play was the most common social play interactions observed. Children in the birth-to-2 room were observed to be very exploratory,
examining spaces and objects with interest and curiosity. One such example is presented in Vignette 4.48, where one child was observed moving through different play spaces, confidently exploring the materials available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette 4.48 Child exploration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Zavier moved from one play space to another during play time in the morning. He crawled to each play space, and then sat as he explored various toys and materials in that space. He manipulated these objects in various ways, including sucking, banging, shaking and observing. Zavier spent 2-minutes to 5-minutes in each play space before moving on. This exploration was a solo endeavour, with no peer interactions present.

When children were participating in social play, confidence was evident through children sharing smiles and laughter with one another, and approaching social play without hesitation.

Children could be seen to be withdrawn at times, and this in turn would result in isolation from their peers and their educator. These children would often exhibit attachment behaviours throughout the day, such as crying, following, reaching and clinging, and these would be directed at their educator. Educators’ responses to attachment behaviours varied depending on the context of the room (for example, during routine transition periods appropriate responses were less common).

In the 2 to 3 year old room, evidence of children’s confidence and self-esteem was obvious through the naturalistic observations. Children were verbal, and demonstrated that they could ask for help when needed, and were better able to communicate with one another, and with educators. The verbal skills exhibited by these children were found to influence the nature of the child’s interactions with
peers, as well as educators, as they were able to ask questions and contribute to shared thinking.

Children exhibited trust and confidence in their educators ability to meet their basic needs, and this was evidenced by children’s participation in daily routines. For example, meal times and sleep times were observed with little resistance from children, indicating a level of trust in their educator.

Children were often observed asserting their feelings, needs and desires. Where age appropriate, children were seen confidentially asking their educator for support with various tasks, particularly if they were becoming frustrated or upset with the challenge. While children did demonstrate the ability to seek support from educators, they were also observed to be very independent in the 2 to 3 year old room. Practices such as getting themselves dressed and feeding themselves were widely present, and encouraged by educators.

Overall, children were observed to be engaged in the learning environment. Exploration, curiosity and playfulness, both socially and individually, was often observed. Risk taking behaviours were evident with some children, and these children were often quick to recover from unsuccessful attempts.

4.3.2.1.2 Sense of self

A sense of self denotes an inward-looking image of ones self, that determine how a human behaves through perspectives of themselves. This indicator was measured by observing children’s body language, social interactions and poise in the ECEC setting. In the birth-to-2 room, children’s sense of self appeared to be informed by their relationship with the educator. For example, children were observed mirroring body language and verbalisations with their educator during interactions.
Children were observed expressing their emotions, particularly when upset or distressed, through crying and body language (bowing head, reaching for educator). Shared affection could be observed between children and educators through hugs and joint laughter, and this was evident in most children in the sample. There were several children in the sample (n = 14), however, that remained disengaged in both the ECEC environment and with their educator. These children typically demonstrated negative internalised behaviours, becoming withdrawn from other children and spending most of their time alone, or seeking proximity with the educator by crying or following the educator around the room. During the semi-structured interviews, educators described disengaged children as harder to build a relationship with, due to the negative behaviours exhibited, for example

...He is just so shy and quiet you forget he is there... they might be a bit more withdrawn so it’s harder to connect with them in any real way (Sophie, Setting 2).

Children in the 2 to 3 year old room were observed as having a positive sense of self, evidenced through their engagement in the environment and their interactions with other children and educators. This positive sense of self was observed through children’s participation in the environment, during transition times and play times. Children in the 2 to 3 years age group were often observed meeting their own physical needs, such as toileting and getting themselves a drink when thirsty. These children were also most likely to assert their own wants and needs throughout the day. While typically children’s assertion was done in a constructive manner, some children (n = 5) would resort to undesirable behaviours to assert their position, particularly when in conflict with a peer (for example, hitting, throwing toys or yelling).
4.3.2.1.3 Vitality

Children’s vitality was observed as a component of their wellbeing. This was evident through children being spontaneous, alert and active. At some point during the day, across all settings, children were observed smiling and laughing as they engaged in activities and experiences. These children were found to move through different activities throughout the day, demonstrating an interest in various forms of play and social interactions. The children in the birth-to-2 room were observed as particularly lively when they were engaged in interactions with educators, although this did not happen in high frequency across the sample.

Some children (n = 14) demonstrated traits of vitality less often, if at all. These children tended to retreat more often than others, exhibiting internalised behaviours of withdrawal and sadness. They would position themselves in certain spaces within the environment, and remain in that space for extended periods of time, not demonstrating any desire to explore.

Children were found to enjoy humour within their interactions with educator and other children, and seemed to be particularly enthused when educators would be ‘silly’ in their interactions. For example, Vignette 4.49 describes a group interaction between the educator and children, where she was deliberately putting on her jacket backwards, resulting in enormous laughter from the children:

Vignette 4.49 Sharing humour

| Setting: 1 | Child/ren: Group | RRRWS Level: N/A |
| Time: PM   | Educator: Kim    |                 |

Kim and the children prepared to go outside. Kim was putting on her jacket, and had put her arm in the wrong sleeve.

**Kim:** Oh silly me
The children who noticed this laughed at her. Kim took off the jacket and tried again, deliberately putting her arms in the wrong sleeves, which resulted in the jacket being back to front. More children noticed and laughed.

**Kim:** Is this right?

**Children:** NOOOO (all together)

**Kim:** Why does this keep happening? (sad face)

Kim took the jacket off and repeated the joke, to which all children were laughing quite loudly. One child walked forward and tried to help Kim with the jacket.

**Kim:** Oh thank you, I am just a silly billy today!

The above example illustrated moments of humour and vitality present in the room, amongst the entire group of children.

Children were also found to exhibit enthusiasm and engagement in activities and experiences, especially during group times. Group times afforded children the opportunity to be involved in social experiences, and to have the attention of educators for extended periods (typically 5-minutes to 10-minutes). Several children (n = 11) in the 2-to-3-year room were observed expressing themselves through ‘show and tell’ times, in which some children would voluntarily go to the front of the group to describe an experience or show an object to their peers. Not all children participated in this experience, and some children (n = 4) demonstrated shy behaviours when asked if they would like a turn at ‘show and tell’. These children were never forced to participate.

There were several children (n = 14) amongst the sample that consistently demonstrated unhappy traits that appeared to interfere or prevent their levels of enjoyment, such as crying or withdrawing from educators and peers. This seemed to be their nature, and regardless of the experiences they were engaged in, enjoyment in the setting and a sense of humour was less evident. These children would tend to
display the same traits, including withdrawal and voluntary seclusion, even when other children or educators attempted to interact with them.

### 4.3.2.1.4 Ability to rest and relax

Children should have a space in their environment where they can retreat for rest and relaxation (DEEWR, 2009). In all ECEC settings (N = 5), quiet spaces were available in the rooms where children could retreat to for solitary time and to relax. These would typically be a quiet corner with pillows, stuffed animals and books. Children would drift in and out of these spaces sporadically throughout the day. It was observed that children were quite adept at regulating their own rest periods, demonstrating autonomy. For example, children were observed crawling or walking over to an arrangement of cushions and lay down with a toy or blanket.

In the 2 to 3 year old room, children were observed as being quite autonomous during the day, and would seek out quiet spaces when they needed to rest. However, when it was sleep time, which the same time during the day in each setting, some children (n = 6) would resist, despite showing signs of being tired. Educators would have to support and encourage some children to sleep during this time, while other easily put themselves to sleep. During this routine rest period, educator and child conflict could be observed, when children fought going to sleep. For example, educators would exhibit frustration in the child’s resistance by using firm tones to instruct the children, such as “lay still!”. In turn, the child would resist the instruction by wriggling on their bed, crying out or trying to stand up.

### 4.3.2.1.5 Summary of Happiness and Satisfaction

Overall, children across the sample were found to exhibit happiness and satisfaction through their behaviours and interactions within the ECEC environment,
and with their educator, as shown in the RRRWS data (M = 4.57). Most often, children would be on their own or with one another during the day when these traits were present, indicating that their sense of self was positive and that they were able to maintain a levels of happiness throughout the day. There were some children who were consistently found to exhibit unhappy traits, such as crying or withdrawing from peers and educators. These children tended to continue these behaviours, even after intervention from the educator.

4.3.2.2 Social functioning

Social functioning is developing in the first 3–years of life, although still immature in nature, and is important in order to engage in social interactions and establish positive inter-personal relationships with others (Arthur et al., 2015). Naturalistic observation, along with the RRRWS data (M = 4.36), provided the source for determining children’s social functioning in the ECEC setting, as a signal of wellbeing. Children were found to engage in social play and interactions within the ECEC environment, in ways that were reflective of their age and stage of social development based on play stages identified in Chapter 2. For example, children in the birth-to-2 room were more likely to be involved in solitary play or parallel play, and would interact with one another incidentally. Whereas children in the 2 to 3 year old room would initiate associate play more often, sharing materials with peers, and were often observed to seek out shared play experiences with peers. The 4 factors that inform the social functioning signal will be presented, including:

1. Social initiative
2. Assertiveness
3. Coping/flexibility
4. Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness
4.3.2.2.1 **Social initiative**

The RRRWS and naturalistic observations recorded children enjoying each other’s company and delighting in the engagements with peers and educators. Laughter was present in social interactions, as well as enthusiasm for activities. As previously stated, the birth to 2 years group were observed engaged in solitary or parallel play, which is indicative of their age and stage of social development. Children would incidentally become socially involved with one another, and through exploration with the social experiences there were sometimes conflicts present, often due to struggles in dealing with turn taking incidents. Educators would facilitate the mediation of conflict, for example, by talking to or redirecting children.

Vignette 4.50 provides an excerpt of a typical social experience witnessed in the 2 to 3 years age group, where children were actively involved in one another’s play and shared joy in their experience through laughter and repetition.

**Vignette 4.50 Social experience**

| Setting: 4 | Child/ren: Ruby & Jesse | RRRWS Level (Ruby): 3.8 |
| Time: AM | Educator: N/A | RRRWS Level (Jesse): 4.2 |

Ruby and Jesse were playing in the water trough outside. Jesse was dropping a toy bug into the water trough, which was causing a big splash. When Jesse would drop the bug, Ruby would laugh, and so would Jesse.

Ruby: Do it again!
Jesse: Whoops! (dropping the bug in the water)
Both children laughed. Ruby found another toy on the ground
Ruby: Do this one!
Jesse: Whoops! (dropping the toy in the water)
Both children laughed.

The above example demonstrates the simplistic nature of most social experiences captured during the naturalistic observations.
Children in the 2 to 3 year old room were observed to seek proximity with their peers. These children were observed in social associative play frequently, and they would accept their peers directions and opinions, although there were several aggressive disputes recorded (n = 17). These were handled in different ways, depending on the educators’ approach to behaviour (for example, a guidance approach or a controlling approach). Children in the 2-to-3-year rooms were still observed in solitary play, during which they seemed satisfied and engaged in activities.

Children’s social initiation bids towards one another were often left unsupported by educators, with the exception of social conflict where educators would intervene. When children were otherwise engaged socially, educators in all settings (N = 5) typically remained absent from children. Educators’ proclivity to distance themselves from children’s social interactions meant that many interactive opportunities were missed throughout the day.

4.3.2.2 Assertiveness

Children’s level of assertiveness varied across the sample, with some children being highly assertive (n = 27), some children being moderately assertive (n = 45) and some children were non-assertive (n = 21), however all children (N = 92) were observed asserting their wants and needs. Children’s assertiveness was measure by observing their willingness and confidence in expressing their needs, pursuing their own interests and asking for help. For example, some children (n = 27) were quite independent and would take or confidently ask for what they wanted, while other children would employ passive traits to have their needs met, such as crying or screaming (n = 21). One example of children’s assertive behaviours can been seen
occurring in the birth-to-2 room with one of the youngest participants, in Vignette 4.51:

**Vignette 4.51 Assertive behaviours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 4</th>
<th>Child/ren: Group</th>
<th>RRRWS Level: N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Renee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Renee sat on the big arm chair with Matthew in her arms. She had his bottle and was attempting to feed him. At first he started to drink the bottle, and then abruptly stopped after only a few seconds. Renee pulled the bottle back and waited a few moments, before attempting to put the bottle back in Matthew's mouth. Matthew shook his head from side to side, avoiding the bottle. Renee sat him up on her knee.

Renee: Come on buddy, its time for your bottle
She laid him back in her arms and tried to put the bottle in his mouth, but again he shook his head from side to side. After several more attempts, with the same result, Renee put the bottle down.

The above examples illustrates that even the younger children, who have no verbal skills and limited motor functions, were capable of being assertive in their wants and needs.

Overall, children across the sample were capable of objecting when their personal rights or space was threatened. For example, if one child took a toy from another child, the latter child would protest vocally (saying “no” or crying) or physically (pushing).

### 4.3.2.2.3 Coping, flexibility

How children manage the daily routines and interactions that dictate an ECEC setting provides insights into their coping skills and flexibility. When distressed, children in the sample exhibited a variety of coping mechanisms. Most children (n = 62) would solely rely on educators to console and support them through these periods, while other were quick to soothes themselves (n = 19), and other’s relied on
a combination of both (n = 11). Whichever coping mechanism observed, most children (n = 86) could be comforted when distressed and moved on quickly from these occurrences with resilience – only a small number of children in the sample were observed to be difficult to comfort (n = 6).

When children were observed in distressing or hectic situations in the ECEC setting, their ability to cope was determined by their ability to be soothed by educators, their willingness participate in routines and their capability to recover from distress. When it came to children that did not cope as well (n = 6), a common example would be drop off time in the mornings. Most children observed across the sample were able to part from their parent with minimal to no protest (n = 59), and those children would quickly engage in the program (note that some children in the sample were not observed arriving at their ECEC setting, n = 47). There were, however, several children that consistently and vehemently protested to being separated from their parent (n = 6). This was typical in the birth-to-2 room, however was also evident in several children attending ECEC in the 2 to 3 years setting. A typical example of a child that would become distressed at drop off time is illustrated in Vignette 4.52:

**Vignette 4.52 Drop-off distress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 4</th>
<th>Child/ren: Malcolm</th>
<th>RRRWS Level: 2.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time: AM</td>
<td>Educator: Renee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Malcolm arrived at the ECEC setting, and Renee greeted him and his mother as they entered the room. Malcolm clung to his moth, holding a blanket to his mouth. After several minutes of verbal exchanges between Renee and Malcolm’s mother, Renee spoke to Malcolm directly

**Renee:** Come on Malcolm, lets see what we have to play with at day-care today

Renee held her arms out. Malcolm resisted the handover, and buried his face into his mothers shoulder, and held onto her. Renee and Malcolm’s mother facilitated the transfer, and Renee was left holding Malcolm, who started crying and kicking and squirming.
As evident in the above example, some children (n = 6) would take much longer to emotionally regulate, regardless of the intervention of educators. These children were found to exhibit the same behaviours during each day that they attended the ECEC setting. It was therefore concluded that this may be a temperament trait or due to their inner working model of attachment (Bowlby, 1969).

Another aspect of children’s coping and flexibility was observed in their willingness to conform to room limits and move through routine transition times. Overall, children accepted and responded to the limits of the rooms. These limits (such as not running inside, using quiet voices inside, and being gentle with peers) were enforced by educators in a variety of ways – some with controlling approaches (directive, rewards and punishment) and some with guidance approaches (collaborative, informed discussions) – and this was dependant on the pedagogy of the educator.

4.3.2.2.4  Positive attitudes towards warmth and closeness

Children across the sample appeared to enjoy being in close proximity of their educator and, specific to the 2 to 3 year old room, close to their peers. This was
concluded through analysis of the RRRWS and naturalistic observations data, which showed children employ attachment seeking behaviours (for example, following, smiling, calling out) to maintain proximity to their educator, as well as moments of shared affection and warmth (for example, cuddles and hand holding) between children and educators, and children and peers. In this way, children were seen reaching out to other humans, educator and children alike, for closeness and affection. Observations that show this have been presented throughout the findings chapter (for example, see section 4.2.4.4, Vignette 4.21).

4.3.2.2.5 Summary of social functioning

In the RRRWS, children’s social functioning was the lowest scoring signal in the RRRWS data, yet was still found to be high (M = 4.36). The naturalistic observations supported this finding, revealing that children would seek and enjoy social company. Children were seen to initiate social encounters, as well as participating and responding well with others. Indicative of the birth to 3 years age group, where children are still developing their social development skills, play was seen in the form of solitary play, parallel play and associative play.

4.3.2.3 Dispositions

Dispositions describe children’s habitual habits of thinking and doing (Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Voseles, 2007, p. 1), and can either be positive (such as curiosity, enthusiasm and helpfulness) or negative (such as selfish, cautious and anxious) in nature. Naturalistic observations and the RRRWS data provided the source for determining children’s dispositions in the ECEC setting, as a signal of wellbeing. The RRRWS data showed children to have high levels of disposition (M = 4.61). The 3 factors that inform the dispositions signal will now be presented, including;
1. Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring
2. Pleasure in sensory experience
3. Persistence/robustness

4.3.2.3.1 Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring

The environments of the ECEC settings in the current study were found to support children’s curiosity and exploration, social interactions and play needs. The rooms all contained private sanctuaries that children could retreat to if need be, as well as stimulating play spaces, and the outdoor environments were well suited to the age groups. These environments supported children’s exploration, and most children would spend the day confidentially engaged in their surroundings. In this way, educators were observed as a secure base for children’s, and this was evident in children returning to educators for support, encouragement and to delight in their discoveries; however, educators were not always able to responding promptly or in meaningful ways to these moments due to distractions in the room (such as routine transition times or other children).

Not all of the 92 children exhibited pleasure and exploration within the ECEC environment. Typically, these children (n = 6) exhibited more withdrawn behaviours, which resulted in them spending a lot of time in one space, rarely moving from one area to another in an exploratory manner. These children tended to require more support from educators to become engaged in play, and would typically need more assistance from educators when distressed.

It was noted in the semi-structured interviews that children’s temperament was a predicator of their involvement in the setting, with one educator claiming:
... Some of the more quiet kids spend most of their time on their own, even when we try to spend time with them they don’t really want to (Nina, Setting 5).

4.3.2.3.2 Pleasure in sensory experiences

Children were observed enjoying sensory experiences, such as with sand, water, food, paints and toys. Children were often observed exploring their environment through all of their five senses, especially in the birth-to-2 room, in the form of smelling, touching, listening, tasting and seeing. In every setting (N = 5), there was always a sensory experience available for children in the room, even in the birth-to-2 rooms – although these would be brought into the room for short periods of the day if they involved water or other choking hazards (like play dough) to ensure safety through supervision of children’s engagement. In this way, all children in the sample (N = 92) had access to sensory play throughout the day, both inside and outside.

Meal times were observed to be a pleasurable experience. Children were given a certain amount of autonomy in serving and feeding themselves (where appropriate and supported by educators), and meal times facilitated social engagement and verbal communication. In one ECEC setting of the sample, meal times were very ‘routine’ based, in that they were undertaken in haste (typically lasting between 15 and 20 minutes). As a result, discussion and playfulness observed in this setting during meal times was limited.

Music and dance were often found in the daily routine, or at least weekly in all ECEC settings. Most children engaged in music and dance experiences with enthusiasm (n = 36), however there were some children that chose to be an observer rather than a participant (n =11) (missing data, n = 45, reflects children who
were not present in the ECEC setting during dance and music times). When children were engaged in music and dance, children’s vitality and enjoyment was evident, and social interactions were vibrant.

4.3.2.3  Persistence and robustness

This indicator was observed when children would persist when faced with challenges in the room (such as completing a puzzle, or trying to dress themselves) as well as showing robustness in their activities. Children in the birth-to-2 room would engage with objects within the room, and through manipulation would sometimes become stuck and not be able to complete a task or play experiences. In these moments, it was observed that children would give several attempts at correcting the issue, and then children would give up and move onto another activity. Otherwise, they would require educators to support their endeavours and facilitate success. Whereas in the 2 to 3 year old room, children would spend more time attempting to complete a task, and some children would become distressed in they could not succeed in a task. For example, getting themselves dressed, completing puzzles or building towers.

4.3.2.3.4  Summary of dispositions

Children’s dispositions were found in the RRRWS data to be at a high level (M = 4.61). Children appeared to have positive dispositions, evident through enthusiasm in exploring their environment, enjoyment in sensory activities and optimistic persistence.

4.3.3  Summary of RQ 3

Overall, RRRWS levels of children’s wellbeing were found to be above satisfactory (M = 4.5), and each signal within the wellbeing scale was seen to be
contributing equally to these levels (happiness and satisfaction, M = 4.57; social functioning, M = 4.36; and dispositions, M = 4.61). The naturalistic observations were found to support the RRRWS data, with children found to be engaging happily within the environment, displaying age appropriate social characteristics and dispositions. The interview data did not add to the findings of RQ3.

4.4 RQ 4 – What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

4.4.1 Aim

Research question four was designed to identify if there was a correlation between levels of educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels. The literature examined in Chapter 2 informed this question, as past research that examined educator-child relationships found that the quality of these relationships influence children school success, social competence and language skills (i.e. positive relationships resulted in positive outcomes in these areas), however less studies have focused on examining how educator-child relationships influence children’s wellbeing, particularly on the birth to 3 years age group. Therefore, the current study aimed to determine what, if any, links were found between educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels.

4.4.2 Links between educator-child relationship level and child wellbeing level

The educator-child relationship level of the sample (N = 92, M = 3.5), as measured by the RRRRS, and the sample level of child wellbeing (N = 92, M = 4.5), as measured by the RRRWS, was investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation
of the assumption of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. Findings revealed that there was a small positive correlation between the mean level of educator-child relationships and the mean level of child wellbeing, as $r = .224$, $n = 92$, $p < .005$.

These results indicate that as educator-child relationship levels rose, child wellbeing levels rose. The strength of the correlation was medium ($r = .30$ to $.49$). This finding suggests that there is a link between educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels in ECEC settings.

To further investigate the correlation between educator-child relationship levels and child wellbeing levels, the RRRRS signals were measured to determine which had the most influence on children’s levels of wellbeing. As identified in Table 4.10, educators’ positive interactions with children showed the strongest correlation with children’s levels of wellbeing ($r = .37$, $n = 92$, $p < .001$). This suggests that educators’ interactions with children are having the strongest influence on children’s wellbeing within ECEC settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RRRRS Signals</th>
<th>Correlation with Wellbeing Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Interactions</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Verbal Exchanges</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).
While these findings reveal that the RRRRS signal, *positive interactions*, was having the strongest influence on children’s wellbeing levels, *positive interactions* was also found to be one of the lowest scoring signals across the sample (M = 2.97), and the naturalistic observation data supported this findings by revealing that educator-child interactions were infrequent and superficial in nature. Furthermore, the RRRWS data, supported by the naturalistic observations, revealed that children in the sample had high levels of wellbeing (M = 4.5).

A link between educator-child relationships and child wellbeing was observed in all settings (N = 5). It appeared that positive educator-child relationships contributed to child exhibition of positive wellbeing signals (including showing humour, exploring and so forth). For example, when educators provided nurturing responses to children, children would appear happy and satisfied (evident through smiles and positive body language). Conversely, when educators’ responses to children were harsh, children would be visibly upset and withdraw from the educator.

**Vignette 4.53 Brief departure causes upset**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting: 1</th>
<th>Child/ren: Talbert</th>
<th>Educator: Kim</th>
<th>RRRRS Level: 3.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Kim was sitting with a small group of children, and announced it was time for morning tea

Kim: Morning tea time! Yay!

Kim stood up and started to walk out the door. Talbert rocked back and forth on the ground while sitting and started to cry. Kim left the room. Talbert continued to rock back and forth and continued to cry. Kim went for only a minute, and when she returned Talbert stopped crying, reaching his arms towards Kim. Kim picked him up and placed him in a highchair.
Also, it appeared that positive wellbeing contributed towards positive educator child-relationships (children received heightened affectional responses from educators when demonstrating high levels of wellbeing through, for example, showing happiness). An example of this could be seen when children initiated humorous interactions, by showing the educator something or behaving in humorous ways. When this occurred, educators would respond with humour, and this interactions would often lead to warmth and affection shared between the child and educators (positive physical contact, such as a hug). It should be noted that the observation data revealed children were the initiators of these types of interactions.

Overall, the RRRRS and RRRWS data revealed a link between educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels, and the naturalistic observation data revealed this link occurred when educators and children were interacting in positive ways.

4.4.3 Summary of RQ4

Findings from the RRRRS and RRRWS correlation revealed that as educator-child relationship levels rose, so too did children’s wellbeing level \( r = .224, n = 92, p < .005 \). The strength of the correlation was medium \( r = .30 \) to .49, and therefore difficult to use as a predictive instrument. This finding will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.
Vignette 5.1 illustrates an apparent lack of connection experienced in some educator-child relationships. The *personal reflection journey* vignettes are not data from the current study, but rather an amalgamation of the researcher’s educator-child relationship experience over her nine years teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. These vignettes aim to enliven the text narrative and set the scene to explore the research issue.

**Vignette 5.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 4**

I watched the children as they played outside in the sun. They had scattered, forming their usual social alliances and engaging in spirited play. I heard my name being called from the swing; immediately I knew which child the voice belonged to, and felt a twinge of annoyance. I ignored the call at first, hoping the child would become discouraged and move on. I heard my name called again and sighed in exasperation. Begrudgingly, I walked over to the child, who was sitting on the swing looking up at me. ‘Can you push me?’ Trevor asked, in his usual high pitch, a hint of petulance in his tone. Reluctantly I pushed the swing, with no real enthusiasm, and wondered how quickly I could escape the interaction. I looked at him and realised, as I had done many times before, that I did not like this child. It alarmed me to have these thoughts and feelings towards a child, and I questioned how this could be possible. There was no single moment, no one occurrence that made it this way. After six months of interactions I felt no more connected to Trevor than I did to a stranger. It caused me to question my philosophy, my pedagogy – myself. Why is this so? How can I have positive relationships with some children, and negative relationships with others?

This chapter discusses the findings derived from the data of the current study, with consideration to the past and current literature presented in Chapter 2. Key findings will firstly be presented for each of the four Research Questions (RQ), followed by a discussion on the significance of the current research findings and the new knowledge found to inform the ECEC field. The four research questions are:
1) What are the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?

2) What factors influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings?

3) What are the levels of children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

4) What, if any, are the links between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing in ECEC settings?

5.1 Discussion of RQ 1

5.1.1 Key findings

Two key findings were revealed from the data in relation to the levels of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings.

1) Educator-child relationships found within regional ECEC settings were satisfactory (M = 3.5 out of 5); and

2) Educator-child relationships were highest in responsiveness (M = 4.45) and appropriateness (M = 4.47), and lowest in positive interactions (M = 2.97) and quality verbal exchanges (M = 2.98).

These key findings were derived from the data through examination of the levels of educator-child relationships using the RRRRS, semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations. The discussion of RQ1 is structured based on the RRRRS signals, including:

1. Levels of educator-child relationships;
2. Responsiveness;
3. Positive interactions;
4. Quality of verbal Exchanges; and
5. Appropriateness
5.1.2 **Levels of educator-child relationships**

The importance of educator-child relationships was well described in Chapter 2, with prominent research asserting that when children experience positive educator-child relationships it supports their learning, development and wellbeing (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Establishing positive educator-child relationships is a key focus of national (ACECQA, 2013b; DEEWR, 2009) and international ECEC curriculum and policy documents (DCSF, 2008; SMoE, 2013; NAEYC, 2009; NZMoE, 1996) and one of the main focuses in the Australian ECEC quality agenda (COAG, 2009). As such, the current study can provide insights and new knowledge describing the current levels of educator-child relationships of regional children birth to 3 years of age.

Based on the Reflect Respect Relate Relationship Scale (RRRRS) data, there was a great deal of variance in the 92 individual educator-child relationship levels (ranging from 1.8 to 5), and the average level of educator-child relationship across the sample was found to be 3.5 out of 5. The RRRRS states that 2.5 is the minimum level to denote a satisfactory educator-child relationship, and so it can be asserted that children from the current study are experiencing at least a satisfactory relationship with their educator (DECS, 2008), which is consistent with past research (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b).

In line with the RRRRS description of ‘satisfactory’ educator-child relationships, the relationships in the current study were found to be mainly functional, in that educators were physically available and met children’s physical needs with superficial contact, rather than nurturing responsiveness on an emotional level. In this discussion, physical needs are associated with primary drives (hunger,
thirst, fatigue, pain) and emotional needs are associated with secondary drives (love, affection), as described by prominent researchers and theorists (for example, Bowlby, 1969; Harlow, 1958; Maslow, 1943). Naturalistic observations revealed that the high demands of the birth to 3 year old rooms (including frequent routine transition times occurring every 20-30-minutes, i.e. mealtimes to sleep times) prevented educators from taking the time to identify and respond to children’s emotional needs (for affection or belonging). The focus on educators responding to children’s physical needs, rather than emotional needs, contradicts the dominant assertion in Australian ECEC quality agenda reform (COAG, 2009), which dictates that educator-child relationships should be emotionally nurturing in order to support positive child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). Such findings suggest that, while educator-child relationships in the birth to 3 year old rooms in ECEC settings are satisfactory, further improvement is required in order to strengthen emotional bonds. This improvement is necessary given the influence educator-child relationships have on children’s brain development, learning and wellbeing (Mustard, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Interview data showed that all educators (N = 10) acknowledged the influence of educator-child relationships on children’s learning, development and wellbeing. It was consistently articulated throughout the interviews that educator-child relationships were something that educators considered highly important and made a conscious effort to attain. Educators’ perspectives on educator-child relationships are in line with previous infant and toddler studies, which have used educators’ perspectives through interview data to suggest that educators consider relationships with children to be highly important in the delivery of quality ECEC
(Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Recchia & Loizou, 2002). However, these studies considered educators’ perspectives alone, without examining their practice, so results do not paint the whole picture of educator-child relationships in ECEC settings; for example, children’s behaviours towards the educator are not captured objectively, and educators’ perspectives might not accurately reflect the nature of relationships, due to the risk of socially desirable reporting. The current study fills this gap, by comparing educators’ perspectives (through interview data) with their practice (through the use of the RRRRS and naturalistic observation data). These combined data sets revealed that while educators professed to hold educator-child relationships in high regard, the overall level of relationships found in the study (satisfactory at $M = 3.5$) suggest that there is a disconnect between the high value and importance educators place on educator-child relationships, and their practice. The apparent disconnect between educators’ perspectives and practice may be an indication of their limited knowledge and understanding of how to develop relationships with the birth to 3 years age group, as no educator could recall undertaking training or professional development which specifically focused on building relationships with children. As such, it is suggested that educators may have a conceptual understanding of the importance of educator-child relationships – possibly based on the presence of relationships in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) curriculum document (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Standards (NQS) (ACECQA, 2013b) document – but that they lack the ability to put this conceptual understanding into practice. Specific training and professional development may support educators to strengthen their knowledge base and translate conceptual understandings of educator-child relationships into quality ECEC
practice, as previous research has suggested (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Ebbeck & Yim, 2008; Recchia & Loizou, 2002).

Overall, the satisfactory levels of educator-child relationships found in the current study suggest that there is room for improvement in educators’ practice, and consideration into ways in which educator-child relationships could be improved is required for the provision of high quality ECEC in Australia. Contemporary research is vital in considering and identifying possible causality for the quality of relationships in ECEC settings. For example, Ahnert and colleagues (2006) conducted a meta analysis, which found that only 42% of 2,867 children were securely attached to their educator. Ahnert and colleagues noted that it was in recent years that fewer children were found to be securely attached to their educator, suggesting that the recent shift towards an educational focus in ECEC, as is the case in Australia with the ECEC quality agenda (COAG, 2009), might be having a negative impact on the quality of educator-child relationships. The notion of educational focus having a detrimental impact upon educator-child relationships is thought-provoking, and can be built upon by further research to provide alternative explanations. In this regard, the findings from the current study showed that there was no evidence of a strong focus on education having a negative impact on educator-child relationships. Rather, the distractions that interrupted educators’ ability to provide nurturing responsiveness to children were a result of demanding and persistent routine transition times and housekeeping duties. Furthermore, educators limited responsiveness to children’s emotional needs (identified through attachment behaviours), and lack of sustained interactions suggest that educators do not have the right amount of training and knowledge to identify and respond to attachment behaviours, and become engaged
in sustained positive interactions to nurture relationships. These findings indicate that the complex nature and consuming demands of the birth to 3 years age group requires more of educators’ time and attention. In this case, lower staff-to-child ratios or additional staff support during busy routine transition times, rather than a decreased focus on education in ECEC, could support educator-child relationships in the birth to 3 years age group. Furthermore, educators may require more training, knowledge and practical strategies in order to prioritise a focus on relationships (through sustained responsiveness and interactions with children) in their practice. This type of training and knowledge should have a strong focus on attachment theory, including attachment behaviours and attachment styles, and how best to respond appropriately to individual children to foster positive-educator child relationships.

5.1.2.1 **Responsiveness**

A signal that informed the quality of educator-child relationships using the RRRRS was *responsiveness*. Rapid brain development occurs in the first 3 years of life, with neural pathways being developed that set the stage for lifelong learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The manner in which significant adults respond to young children’s behaviours and needs plays a pivotal role in the development of a child’s brain architecture (Mustard, 2006), as well as influencing the child’s internal working model, which becomes a prototype for all future human relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Responsiveness in ECEC settings means being physically and emotionally available to children in order to meet children’s needs in a prompt, sensitive and caring manner (Rolfe & Linke, 2011). A keen knowledge of child development and attachment behaviours and styles pertaining to individual children is essential for
educators to provide meaningful and nurturing responsiveness to children, which influences educator-child relationships (DECS, 2008; Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Goossens & Van Ijzendoorn, 1990).

In the current study, responsiveness was found to be one of the highest scoring signals of the RRRRS (M = 4.45), and was described by educators during the interviews as a key factor contributing to positive educator-child relationships. In the ECEC settings of the current study, educators were found to respond to children’s basic physical needs (such as fatigue, hunger, toileting, pain) effectively and efficiently. While previous research suggests that responding to children’s physical needs is essential for building educator-child relationships (Bornstein et al., 2008), attachment theory posits that emotional responsiveness must also be provided to children in order to develop positive relationships (Bowlby, 1969). In the current study, when educators were observed as being highly responsive to children on a physical and emotional level, it was mainly due to the extra time that the educator spent with the child, which demonstrated interest and understanding towards the child. For example, when a child required emotional support during times of distress, the educator who would stop what she was doing and physically walk over to the child, get down on their level and support them was found to provide a high level of responsiveness, which nurtured the educator-child relationship. Conversely, the educator that would respond to the child in a superficial manner (for instance, dismissing them or calling out a vague instruction from across the room) was found to be non-responsive and therefore contributed to lower educator-child relationship levels. The implication of this finding is that due to the high demands of the birth to 3
year old rooms in ECEC, educators may not have time to respond in nurturing ways to children’s emotional needs.

Findings from the current study showed that children whose educator-child relationship level was below satisfactory (n = 6 at M = 2.5 or less) would experience harsh and detached responsiveness from their educator. Children in this *below satisfactory* category were seen directing attachment behaviours at their educators (such as following, reaching or crying) which were either ignored or rejected. Similar findings were reported by Howes and Hamilton (1992b), who found that children who were less securely attached to their educators received harsh and avoidant responses from them (though Howes and Hamilton could not discern with certainty the cause for these harsh responses towards poorly attached children). In the current study, interviews with educators provided further insights into the findings of the RRRRS and naturalistic observation data. In fact, educators’ detached and harsh responses to children’s attachment behaviours were articulated as being a result of feelings of frustration, particularly towards those children who exhibit negative internalised and externalised behaviours (such as withdrawal, crying and aggression). These specific feelings of frustration towards children’s undesirable behaviours, a practice which results in harsh and detached responsiveness from educators, needs to be addressed in order to provide quality ECEC. One way to overcome this issue may lie in critical reflective practice. Specifically, educators need to recognise the frustrations that they feel towards certain child behaviours, and work towards developing practical strategies to minimise expressing frustration and irritation towards children.
Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) argue that relationships are bi-directional in nature; however, the developmental stage of children in the birth to 3 years age group denotes limited emotional regulation skills and underdeveloped social competence (Berk & Meyers, 2016). Therefore, children are less able to adjust their behaviours to resolve conflicts or barriers in the relationship, and less capable of adapting their behaviour to elicit a more nurturing response from educators. In this case, educators must alter their own responses towards behaviours they consider frustrating, and towards children with whom they have a poor relationship with, in order to overcome conflicts and barriers. In order for this practical strategy to be successful in supporting relationships, educators must have appropriate knowledge, training and understanding of children from birth to 3 years old. This is problematic, as it has been suggested in previous studies that educators may not have the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively work with this age group (Bagdi & Vacca, 2006; Mann & Carney, 2008) and its unique and specific requirements. The current study concurs with this previous research, in that educators did not appear to have a strong understanding of what it means to work in the birth to 3 year old rooms (which educators stated themselves during the interviews). Of particular relevance to this group is the fact that educators should have a good understanding of attachment theory (encompassing knowledge of attachment behaviours, attachment styles and attachment phases) in order to build relationships with children in this age range (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008). Educators’ currently working in the ECEC field can acquire this knowledge and understanding through additional training and professional development, which focus on recognising children’s emotional stage of development and social competence, responding appropriately to children’s
emotional needs (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b), and learning to identify and appropriately respond to attachment behaviours. Additionally, for those who are working towards a qualification to begin working in the ECEC field, educational institutes that provide diploma and degree qualifications must ensure that these necessary skills and knowledge are embedded in their course structure, thereby preparing educators to work with the birth to 3 years age group.

5.1.2.2 Positive interactions

Positive interactions between educators and children are considered essential for positive educator-child relationships in Australian ECEC settings (ACECQA, 2013b; DEEWR, 2009). Particularly in the birth to 3 years age group, interactions that are respectful and sensitive are considered fundamental in building and maintaining positive educator-child relationships (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008). These interactions in ECEC settings are evidenced by warmth and affection, sustained play, expressions of positive feelings and a genuine interest taken in the child (DECS, 2008). In the current study, interview data showed that educators consider positive interactions with children to be a key factor in contributing to positive educator-child relationships, which is supported by previous literature (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

During the interviews, educators stated that positive play interactions were a key component to building positive educator-child relationships. Given educators’ perspectives on positive interactions with children, it would be expected that positive play interactions would be observed in abundance in the current study; however, positive interactions was the lowest-scoring signal of the RRRRS (M = 2.97 out of 5), and found infrequently throughout the naturalistic observation data. The low levels of the positive interaction signal found through the RRRRS and naturalistic
observation data appeared to be due to the lack of sustained play interactions between educators and children, rather than the routine and communicative nature of educator-child interactions observed throughout the day; in fact, the latter were predominantly positive. For example, educators of the current study would show warmth and friendliness towards children in verbal exchanges, however they rarely engaged in one-on-one sustained play interactions. As with responsiveness, it appeared that frequent routine transition times hindered educators’ ability to be engaged in sustained play interactions with children. Routine transition times occurred in the ECEC setting every 20 to 30 minutes, resulting in limited time for educators to be seated and engaged with children in the room, especially in a one-on-one situation.

While findings from the current study do point towards limited sustained play interactions as contributing towards lower levels of positive interactions, educators’ basic interactions with children throughout the day were in line with the NAEYC’s developmentally appropriate practice guidelines for infants and toddlers (2009). In line with the NAEYC guidelines, it was found that educators’ expressed positivity towards children through their facial expressions, tones and body language—which is considered important, as children as young as four months are known to be able to discriminate among different emotions expressed by adults (Hetherington et al., 1999). However, there were also occasions where educators would employ harsh tones and directive language (both verbal and non-verbal) when interacting with a child (usually when disciplining them). For example, educators pointing their finger in the child’s face, educators holding their hand up to a child while ignoring and walking away from them, or yelling “stop it” or “move away” while roughly guiding the child
by the arm. Furthermore, it appeared that some educators would avoid play
interactions with children by ignoring child prompts for play, moving away from the
child, and undertaking tasks in the room (such as preparing for routine transition
times or housekeeping duties), resulting in limited, if any, play interactions. These
can be considered avoidance techniques, and previous research has found that when
educators avoid interacting with children, it can have a negative impact on learning
and development (Fein, 1995). Children who were repeatedly exposed to harsh or
limited interactions with their educator were found to have lower levels of educator-
child relationships (n = 6 below M = 2.5), which is consistent with previous studies
(Howes & Hamilton, 1992b; Rudasill, 2011). For example, Howes and Hamilton
(1992b) found that children who did not have a secure attachment to their educator
not only experienced harsher and more detached interactions, but also less
involvement with their caregiver. Such findings, in combination with the findings
from the current study, suggest that when the quality of educator-child relationships
is poor, children receive less play interactions and harsher feedback from educators.
The implications of this finding are that without establishing a positive educator-child
relationship in the ECEC setting, children’s learning and wellbeing are at risk, due to
limited and harsh interactions with their educator.

Furthering the previous mention of routine transition times in regards to
positive interactions, educators of the current study were observed to be regularly
distracted and unavailable for sustained play interactions due to the high frequency
(every 20-30 minutes) of routine transition times that occurred throughout the day.
Furthermore, these would disrupt educator-child interactions when they did occur.
For example, if an educator and child were engaged in play in the room, as soon as it
became time for lunch the educator would stand up and leave the child to prepare for lunch time. Interestingly, although routine transition times appeared to prevent sustained play interactions between educator and child, when educators were observed as being engaged with a child one-on-one it was during routine transition times (such as toileting or sleep times). The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) asserts that routine transition times offer opportunities for educators to interact with children, thereby strengthening relationships; however, these interactions are brief and superficial in nature, as they occur in a hurried manner, without opportunity to extend on the interaction in meaningful ways. In this case, educators should also focus on interacting with children one on one during play, which was not often observed in the current study.

The limited sustained interactions between children and educators found in the current study suggest that educators are taking the opportunity to interact with children during routine transition times. Nevertheless, these routine transition times are also preventing sustained play interactions, which are more meaningful to children’s learning (Arthur et al., 2015; Banham et al., 2000; Hamre et al., 2013) and the quality of their educator-child relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Educators need to make a concerted effort to ensure sustained play interactions with children are occurring in the ECEC setting, particularly one-on-one. Educators may require some support in order to make improvements in this area; for instance, attending professional development and training courses, which provide educators with ideas and strategies for interacting with children. In fact, past research has found that educator training increases the quality of educator-child
interactions (Burchinal et al., 2002), and could support educators practice in ECEC settings.

5.1.2.3 Quality verbal exchanges

Literature presented in Chapter 2 asserts that quality communication between children and educators supports educator-child relationships (McMullen & Dixon, 2009). Communication with children must include a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication, particularly in the birth to 3 years age group, where communicative skills are immature and require educator to infer messages through behaviours (Bowlby, 1969). Certain communication traits should be evident in educators’ practice involving the birth to 3 years age group, including labelling (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002), using active listening techniques, encouraging children to express themselves (CCCV, 2011) and stimulating conversation within the ECEC setting (DEEWR, 2009). When children and educators sustain meaningful, turn-taking conversations, educator-child relationships are supported (DECS, 2008). While the quality of verbal exchanges in the current study was found to be one of the lowest scoring signals in the RRRRS (M = 2.98), these were still at a satisfactory level, suggesting that educators are meeting the EYLF guidelines in supporting educator-child relationships through quality verbal exchanges in ECEC settings (DEEWR, 2009).

Four specific verbal exchange practices were observed to elicit positive responses from children, which in turn contribute to educator-child relationships: 1) speaking clearly and slowly in an appropriate tone; 2) being on the child’s physical level; 3) using age-appropriate language; and 4) having the child acknowledge/repeat words back to the educator. These practices are in line with communication training modules in Australia (CCCV, 2011), as they support responsiveness and model
appropriate communication skills to children. When these four communicative traits were not present, the quality of the verbal exchange was affected. In fact, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) stipulates that educators promote children’s communication skills by providing rich language models in the ECEC setting, incorporating sustained communication with children frequently throughout the day.

While the above four communicative techniques found in the current study did appear to promote educator-child relationships in the 2 to 3-year-old rooms, they were not found to be as helpful in communicating in the birth to 1 year old rooms. Rather, the quality of educator-child relationships was fostered when educators accurately inferred a child’s need through analysing their behaviour, and responded appropriately. For example, children in this age range rely heavily on non-verbal methods of communication, and express their needs through ingrained attachment behaviours (pointing, crying, gazing, and so forth), with the intent of having their needs met (Bowlby, 1969). Educators in the current study were limited in their ability to accurately interpret children’s non-verbal communication, and sometimes ignored these attempts at communication when distracted with routine transition times. Nyland (2004) had a similar finding, in that educators often misunderstand children’s non-verbal communication, and therefore do not respond appropriately to children’s needs. Nyland also pointed out the frequent routine transition times present in ECEC settings distracted educators from noticing children’s attempts at non-verbal communication. In order to improve this area of practice, educators may need additional training, related specifically to actually interpreting children’s non-verbal communication and attachment behaviours. Though, Nyland (2009) points out that training alone may not be enough, and
questions how routine transition times can be reconsidered in order to better support educators' ability to appropriately converse with children.

5.1.2.4 Appropriateness

Findings revealed that educators’ practice was appropriate for the birth to 3 years age group. Appropriate developmental practice in this period is of critical importance in ECEC settings (ACECQA, 2013b). The NAEYC advice on developmentally appropriate practice for infants and toddlers stipulates that the early years are all about relationships (Copple et al., 2013). In this way, educators in the current study are considered to be engaging in developmentally appropriate practice, as satisfactory levels of educator-child relationships were found in the regional ECEC settings. Furthermore, findings from the current study suggest that children attending regional ECEC settings are receiving appropriate practice that promotes educator-child relationships through the 8 practices and 5 principles of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Specifically, educators in the current study were found to provide age-appropriate environments to children, and basic interactions and responses met children's immediate physical needs. However, there was still room for improvement in this area.

These findings could be an indication of the level of training of the educators’ in the current study, who all held diploma qualifications. According to the AQFC (2013), diploma-trained educators have special skills and knowledge, which imply a good understanding of child development and, therefore, appropriate practice. However, a bachelor trained educator is equipped with more robust and broad knowledge and skills that may further increase the quality of practice that serves to support educator-child relationships. In this way, ECEC’s quality agenda proposal to
have a bachelor trained educator working with birth to 3 year old children (COAG, 2009) has the potential to improve the quality of educator-child relationships in Australian ECEC settings.

5.1.3 Summary of RQ1 discussion

The findings from the current study suggest children attending regional ECEC settings are experiencing a satisfactory relationship with their educator, thereby demonstrating that the NQS quality area number 5 relationships with children (ACECQA, 2013b) is being adhered to. These educator-child relationships were found to be higher in responsiveness and appropriateness, and lower in positive interactions and quality verbal exchanges; however, all RRRRS signals had room for improvement. Frequent routine transition times were found to be the biggest hindrance to educator-child relationships, as the interfered with the quality of responsiveness and positive interactions between children and educators. Furthermore, children’s limited verbal skills, and educators’ inability to support and appropriately respond to children’s non-verbal cues, were also found to be detrimental to the educator-child relationship. Findings suggest that educators may need some support to further enhance their practice in relation to enhancing quality verbal exchanges and prioritising positive interactions with every child in the ECEC setting.
5.2 Discussion of RQ 2

5.2.1 Key findings

The current study found 13 factors that influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings, which served to inform insights into RQ2. Within these 13 factors, five key findings were unearthed, including:

1) Responsiveness was found to be the main factor that influences educator-child relationships (discussed in section 5.2.3);
2) The time educators have to spend with children in the ECEC setting has a positive influence on educator-child relationships;
3) Overly frequent routine transition times in the ECEC settings have a negative influence on educator-child relationships;
4) Children’s negative internalising and externalising behaviours adversely influence the educator-child relationship; and
5) Establishing positive trust between educators and children, through various acts, has a positive influence on educator-child relationships.

The data also revealed that factors such as gender and educators’ work experience had no influence on educator-child relationships in the birth-to-3 rooms of the ECEC settings. Additionally, factors such as personality, temperament, mental health, child vulnerability and educator-parent relationships are considered to hold a marginal influence on educator-child relationship.

All 13 factors that served to provide insight into the five key findings will be discussed. These 13 factors are positioned within three main categories: 1) external factors; 2) child characteristics; and 3) educator characteristics (see Table 5.1).
Table 5.1: Factors found to influence educator-child relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Factors</th>
<th>Child Characteristics</th>
<th>Educator Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time - ECEC attendance</td>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator-parent relationships</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine transition times</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-to-child ratios</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Mental wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>Training and work experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.2 External factors

The current study found that some of the most significant influences on educator-child relationships were external factors, including ECEC attendance, educator-parent relationships, routine transition times and staff-to-child ratios.

5.2.2.1 Time – ECEC attendance

The quantity of time spent with children was mentioned by all educators (N = 10) as an influencing factor in relation to their relationships with children. Time spent with the child was considered by educators to strengthen the relationships, as child and educator would use that time to adapt to one another, thereby allowing educators to build a repertoire of knowledge about each child that would serve to inform their interactions with them (DEEWR, 2009). Findings of the current study revealed that children attending the ECEC setting 3 or 4 days per week had higher educator-child relationships levels, specifically compared to children who attended 1 or 2 days per week. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has found that children experience stronger educator-child relationships when they spend more time in ECEC settings per week (Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990). The most recent statistics show that children in Australia are spending an average of 22 hours per week in ECEC settings (ABS, 2011), which is in line with the amount of time found in the current study that supports positive educator-child relationships. In this
case, it can be suggested from the current findings that the average amount of time Australian children are attending ECEC settings would support positive educator-child relationships.

Educators described the relationship they had with children who attended more days per week as familiar and close. Educators’ perspectives suggest that when children attend the ECEC at least several days per week, an emotional bond is established and feelings of closeness are fostered, which provides a level of comfort in one another’s presence that supports a positive relationship. These perspectives were also held by educators of a previous research project, in which educators described growing closer to children over a period of time (Recchia, 2012). Recchia’s case study, which examined two toddlers’ relationships with their educator as they transitioned from the ECEC infant room to the toddler room, revealed that even when educator-child relationships were initially difficult or negative in nature, they would improve over time. Findings from educators’ perspectives in the current study add further insight, as it was revealed that when children only attend their ECEC setting one day per week, their interactions are not as natural because they do not know each other well enough and have not established an emotional connection. In this sense, it may be suggested that attending ECEC settings more days per week will contribute towards positive educator-child relationships.

While the findings from the current study show that educator-child relationship levels increase as children’s ECEC attendances increase, it must also be noted that past studies have found that too much time in ECEC settings can contribute to negative child outcomes (Keane, 2007; Van Beijsterveldt et al., 2005; NICHD, 2003; Guilfoyle & Parry, 2006). While it is acknowledged that negative
outcomes of ECEC attendance are evident in the literature, the findings from the current suggest that there is a positive outcome of extended time in ECEC settings – the attainment of a positive educator-child relationship. In turn, it is suggested that these positive relationships will support children’s brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), social functioning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes & Hamilton, 2002) and wellbeing (Graham, 2011), thereby contributing to positive child outcomes and, as Bronfenbrenner stated (1979), providing a buffer against the negative aspects of ECEC attendance.

What is important to note is that children have no say in how many days they attend their ECEC setting, even though this is a matter that directly affects them (UN, 1990). As such, findings which suggest better educator-child relationships result from 3 to 4 days attendance per week should be made known to parents, so that they can make informed decision about their child’s ECEC attendance (in terms of positive and negative implications). Furthermore, educators need to acknowledge and find ways to overcome the difficulties and challenges that are faced by children only attending ECEC settings 1 to 2 days per week, in order to ensure quality ECEC is delivered to all children (DEEWR, 2009). For example, educators might prioritise spending additional time with children who only attend the ECEC setting 1 or 2 days per week, in order to increase familiarity and establish bonds.

5.2.2.2 Educator-parent relationships

The research findings revealed that educators consider the educator-parent relationship to influence the educator-child relationship, which was also the view held by educators in a study undertaken by Ebbeck and Yim (2009). It was articulated by educators of the current study that shared information about the child creates a
link between the home and ECEC setting, resulting in educators gaining knowledge of
the child’s unique home environment to support interactions and ultimately
relationships. These perspectives are in line with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological
systems theory, which describes the intimate connection between home and ECEC
settings in the child’s mesosystem, with evident influences on children’s wellbeing
and relationships.

In the current study, interactions between educators and parents were found
to be positive as best, and neutral at worst. This demonstrates a link between
educators’ practice and the EYLF, which stipulates that educators must work towards
building positive relationships with parents in ECEC to support child outcomes
(DEEWR, 2009). The positive, or at least neutral, interactions between educators and
parents in the current study can be considered to be having a positive influence on
the educator-child relationships, in that children have models for positive
relationships, and connections between home and ECEC are present. These findings
support those from an earlier study by O’Conner (2012), who used the NICHD data
to examine factors associated with the quality of educator-child relationships from
first grade to fifth grade. O’Conner’s investigation found that positive interactions
between educators and parents resulted in positive educator-child relationships.
Furthermore, findings of the current study support assertions made in previous
research that point out the benefits of acquiring critical information about the child
through parents that serves to inform the educator-child relationships (Pianta et al.,
1997; Rouse, 2012b).

Educators of the current study articulated that it is not always easy to build
positive relationships with parents. When educators find parents to be challenging,
this tends to have a negative influence on their relationship with the child, either due to limited home information or conflict with the parents. For example, educators suggested that if they feel irritation with a parent, they would likely transfer those feelings of irritation onto the child. It can therefore be suggested that even though educators are aware of the importance of positive educator-parent relationships in the delivery of quality ECEC, it is difficult for them to separate their negative feelings towards the parent from their relationships with the child. Children can be the unwilling recipients of educator-parent conflict, which can cause friction between the educator and child and may influence the level of relationship they share. As the current study only gained educators’ perspectives, it would be helpful to also learn parents’ perspectives on this relationship, to determine their awareness of the consequences that a negative relationship with the educator has for their child.

Educators are required to build positive relationships with parents in order to support children in ECEC settings and foster educator-child relationships (DEEWR, 2009), and this practice was evident in the current study. For example, educators and parents were observed in positive turn-taking discussions regarding individual children on a daily basis. When educators face challenges in building a positive educator-parent relationship, being able to appropriately manage conflict with parents in a way that does not impact on children is essential practice that may support educator-child relationships. Educators’ level of training and knowledge on creating positive relationships with parents may offer educators further insights and strategies that support professional practice in this area. In this way, conflict with challenging parents can be appropriately managed in order to avoid any negative implications for the educator-child relationship.
5.2.2.3  **Routine transition times**

Routines in ECEC settings include sleep times, mealtimes, group times and toileting times. Transition times in ECEC settings are defined as movements between activities, for example from group time to lunchtime. Together, routine group times describe children from moving from one routine to the next in the ECEC setting. In the current study, routine transition times were found to be methodical, predetermined and frequent (occurring every 20-30 minutes). The persistent nature of these routine transition times would often interfere with educators’ ability to be emotionally available and responsive, and were also found to interrupt sustained positive interactions. The limited interactions found in the RRRRS data was indicative of these routine transition times, and it is therefore suggested from the findings of this study that educators struggle to make themselves physically and emotionally available to children during these busy times. However, in order to ensure quality practice, Kostelnik and colleagues (2015) that educators must be making themselves available to children.

Furthermore, the predetermined system observed indicated that there was little room for flexibility in children’ routines, particularly in the 2 to 3 year rooms. Findings from Nyland’s research (2004) were similar to the findings of the current study, in that the lack of individualised routines observed contradicts the common ECEC notion that infants and toddlers enjoy flexible routines that occur on demand. As such, persistent routine transition times in the birth-to-2 and 2-to-3 rooms resulted in a hectic daily environment, which required educators to be constantly preparing the environment and the children for the next transition time. When educators were distracted with routine transition times (which occurred every 20-
30-minutes of the day) they were less able to respond to children’s needs, and less likely to be engaged in play interactions. This has implication for the quality of the educator-child relationships, as children may not develop a sense of trust that their educator will appropriately respond to their needs (Erikson, 1950), or be a secure base for their exploration (Dolby, 2007). Additionally, these findings oppose the directive guidance of the EYLF, which suggests that educators should be handling routine transition times effectively to support children (DEEWR, 2009).

Findings from this study suggest that it would be more beneficial for educators to prioritise play interactions and cater to the individual needs of each child, rather than conform to predetermined routine transition times; essentially, educators should consider abandoning rigid routines in favour of progressive and individualised routine that support the individual child, as suggested in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Educators should ensure they are appropriately managing and organising effective ones to reduce stress (Hamre et al., 2013; Pattinson et al., 2014), which can be achieved through careful consideration of the individual needs of the children, and with thought towards strengthening educator-child relationships through sustained interactions and nurturing responsiveness. Children and families should be given a voice when it comes to informing the routine of the ECEC setting, in order to ensure children’s rights are being met (UN, 1990), and positive educator-child relationships are fostered. The allocation of staffing throughout the day could also be reconsidered, so that when unavoidable routine transition times need to occur, an additional educator could be positioned in the room to ensure one remains engaged in sustained play interactions with children, and available to provide emotionally nurturing responsiveness. These suggestions aim to support educator-
child relationships, and could also serve to limit the known stress of routine times in ECEC settings (Pattinson et al., 2014). Attempting to keep all children in the room to the same routine does not support the development of autonomy (Porter, 2016). The notion of conforming to out-dated practices such as whole group routine transition times restrains contemporary practice in ECEC.

5.2.2.4 **Staff-to-child ratios**

Previous research has indicated that high staff-to-child ratios contribute towards a lack in educator-child interactions (Cryer et al., 2005; Bornstein et al., 2006), and so when staff-to-child ratios are low, it has been found to have a positive influence on educator-child relationships (Pianta et al., 2002; Recchia, 2012). Although the current study was undertaken in a time when the Australian ECEC quality agenda had recently implemented lower staff-to-child ratios in the birth to 3 years age group (COAG, 2009), limited one-on-one interactions between educator and child were still found. Therefore, findings from the current study differ from previous research that identify low staff-to-child ratios as supporting sustained play interactions (Pianta et al., 2002; Recchia, 2012), and instead considers the demands of persistent routine transition times as a barrier to educator-child play interactions.

It can therefore be suggested that, regardless of how many children there are in the ECEC room, routine transition times in ECEC are persistent, and involve duties which require the educator to engage in activities away from the child’s immediate proximity, which in turn limits or disrupts opportunities for sustained educator-child play interactions and relationship building. In this case, additional support needs to be provided to educators so that they can better prioritise and manage routine transition times effectively, in order to limit the disruptions.
5.2.3 Child characteristics

The current study found that child characteristics influenced the educator-child relationship, including temperament, behaviour, trust and vulnerability. Gender was also examined, but found to have no influence on the educator-child relationship levels.

5.2.3.1 Temperament

Findings showed that educators consider the child’s temperament to influence the educator-child relationship, as children’s varying temperament styles elicit different feelings in educators. This finding is consistent with previous research, which suggests that children’s temperament plays a significant role in educator-child relationships (Mann & Carney, 2008; Owen et al., 2008). Past research has asserted that children’s temperament may drive certain behaviours in the environment, which affects educators’ responses to said behaviours, and in turn influences the relationship (Chess & Thomas, 2012). The current study supports this notion, as educators articulated that they respond differently to children based on traits associated with their temperament (for example, a child who is generally cheerful is easier to respond to than a child who reacts negatively to new experiences).

Furthermore, children who exhibited difficult temperament traits were found to experience less responsiveness from educators, and sometimes harsh and detached interactions. This is similar to findings from Sroufe (1985), who found educators are more likely to be nonresponsive to children with a difficult temperament. Ultimately, the current study is consistent with previous research, which suggests children with difficult temperaments experience lower levels of educator-child relationships (De Schipper et al., 2008).
Findings also revealed that educators are better able to respond to children’s varying temperaments depending on their own personalities. This notion has been presented by past scholarly literature, which identifies the need for a ‘match’ between educator and child (Chess & Thomas, 2012). In this way, educators are well-positioned to support children through nurturing responses to temperament traits, based on their own unique characteristics (Churchill, 2003). Furthermore, identifying children’s temperament early in the development of educator-child relationships is one way that can support educators’ preparations in responding to the child (Strum, 2004). Ultimately, educators must ensure they have both the knowledge and skills to appropriately respond to children’s personal traits and behaviours in order to support educator-child relationships, as noted by the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

5.2.3.2 Child behaviour

Humans behave in specific ways to have their needs met (Maslow, 1943), and these behaviours sometimes cause friction between adults and children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In the current study, children’s negative externalising behaviours (including crying and physical aggression) were found to adversely influence the educator-child relationship in both the RRRRS data and the interview data, which is consistent with previous research (Hamre et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2000; Jerome et al., 2008; Thijs & Koomen, 2009).

Hamre and Pianta (2001) suggest that negative externalising behaviours are more damaging to the educator-child relationship than negative internalising ones, which was also the case in the current study. For example, educators claimed that they had to spend extra time in dealing with negative externalised behaviours, and that behaviours caused the educators to feel resentment towards the child. Initial
findings from the current study seemed to suggest that children were contributing to
the lower levels of educator-child relationships through undesirable behaviours;
however, this conclusion did not recognise the bi-directional element of the
educator-child relationship (Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For instance,
educators stated in the interviews that children’s undesirable behaviours would elicit
negative feelings (including irritation, frustration and resentment) and result in them
delivering harsh responses to children; nevertheless, educators did not reflect on
their own behaviours towards the child as a contributing factor.

Further analyses of the findings from the RRRRS and naturalistic observation
data revealed that it was educators’ unique responses to children’s negative
behaviours that were having an adverse effect on the relationship. For example,
when educators were observed using a guidance approach (highly
responsive/offering children choice) when confronted with children’s undesirable
behaviour, the educator-child relationship did not appear to suffer adverse effects. A
guidance approach model promotes understanding children’s emotional needs
through analysis of external and internal behaviours. Porter (2016) suggests a
guidance approach to managing children’s behaviour as being ideal for meeting
children’s needs and shaping their future. Children are treated with respect, and
their behaviour is guided through role modelling and conversation; above all else,
the educator-child relationship is central to the guidance approach. This approach to
supporting children’s behaviour is also in line with the UNCRC (UN, 1990) and DEECD
suggested behaviour management approaches for educator working in ECEC.

On the other hand, when educators in the current study would employ a
controlling approach to dealing with children’s behaviour (directive/punishments),
the educator-child relationship was found to be negatively affected. A controlling approach relies on dominance and correction of behaviour, where the educator feels compelled to impose strict rules and instructions on children’s behaviour in ECEC settings (Porter, 2016). When children behave in ways that oppose the set rules, educators resort to punishments or rewards to control children’s behaviour, even though this is considered inappropriate practice (DEECD, 2010). In the current study, educators were observed imposing punishments on children when dealing with undesirable behaviour, in the form of time outs, withholding of food and removal of toys/equipment. These findings suggest that educators may not be aware of appropriate strategies to supporting children’s behaviour, and may require additional information and support for dealing with children’s undesirable behaviours in order to adhere to professional practice standards. Furthermore, findings from the current study highlight that behaviour, as an influencing factor on educator-child relationships, is less about the child's behaviour, and more about educators’ ability to appropriately respond to and guide it.

It can be asserted from the current findings that educators’ own responses to children’s negative internalised and externalised behaviours are influencing the educator-child relationship. In line with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), educators must ensure they respond appropriately to children’s varying behaviours. In this case, educators need to have a strong knowledge base informing their practice in relation to understanding why children behave the way they do, and how best to respond to meet the child’s needs (Kostelnik et al., 2015).
Findings revealed that educators consider establishing trust as essential for building positive educator-child relationships. The idea of trust presented during the interviews encapsulates its emotional component, in that children require educators to be emotionally available, caring and affectionate in order to build positive relationships (Erikson, 1950). Educators in the current study consider nurturing responsiveness as a key component in gaining children’s trust, which has also been suggested by previous research as a vital element to a positive educator-child relationship (Howes & Hamilton, 1992b; Rolfe & Linke, 2011).

When educators spoke of trust, the terminology was strongly linked to the Circle of Security (Dolby, 2007), which is a model informed by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) that positions educators as a secure base for children to use while they confidently explore their environment, and a safe haven to return to when distressed or wanting to share their wonder and discovery. The Circle of Security is considered a helpful model for educators to promote positive educator-child relationships, built on trust and responsiveness (DEEWR, 2009). During the interviews of the current study, educators supported the prominent position of the Circle of Security model in ECEC, stating, for example, that “they know they can come to you” (Karen, Setting 2). This suggests that the educators in this study recognised the importance of providing children with a secure base and safe haven that they can use to confidently explore their environment. Such recognition aligns with the central tenets of the EYLF, which state that providing a safe environment is essential for positive relationships (DEEWR, 2009).
Findings from the current study also suggest that physical connectedness between educator and child contributes towards building trust, in that it demonstrates genuine feelings of care and affection towards a child. For example, naturalistic observation data revealed educators would regularly show physical affection towards children, in the form of cuddles, holding hands and nursing children on their knee. Developing trust through positive physical contact to support relationships is in line with scholarly literature, which states that trust is strengthened when two people engage in positive and nurturing touch, supported by the release of oxytocin (Mober, 2014). Educators and children of the current study were observed sharing intimate moments together, where they would embrace and share warmth and affection. Previous studies support this practice in establishing positive relationships, as skin-to-skin contact has been found to support an emotional bond between children and their carers (Benoit, 2004). While Benoit’s study examined mother-child relationships, the key premise of this study, being that physical contact supports attachment, may be considered transferable to the context of educator-child relationships in ECEC. The EYLF also describes showing tenderness and affection towards children as essential not only for positive educator-child relationships, but also to foster children’s wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).

What is important to note is that positive touch in ECEC can sometimes be thwarted by an indistinct line between appropriate and inappropriate practice. For example, Mazur and Pekor (1985) assert that educators must walk a fine line between providing children with nurturing and sensitive physical affection, while showing awareness and respect for children’s body integrity and autonomy. This position is also evident in the UN rights of the child (1990), which clearly states that
children have the right to assert power over their own body. DECS (2011) outline appropriate physical contact practices for educators, which remind educators to pay attention to young children’s cues. For example, if a child indicates that they want comfort by outreaching their arms towards an educator, that educator should provide physical comfort; if a child stiffens or shows discomfort at physical contact, the educators must desist. Overall, the importance of physical contact in the establishment of trust was described by educators in the current study, and is supported by previous literature; however, educators must be aware of the appropriate practice boundaries dictated by the Australian government (DECS, 2011) and with respect to the rights of the child (UN, 1990).

5.2.3.4 Gender

Based on the RRRRS and semi-structured interview data, it was found that children’s gender did not influence the educator-child relationship level in the birth to 3 years age group. This finding is in contrast with previous research, which has repeatedly found that children’s gender influences the educator-child relationship (Ahnert, 2006; Howes, Philips & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Howes, 2000; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Hughes, Cavell & Wilson, 2001). Specifically, the aforementioned studies have found that educators tend to have better relationships with female children in the preschool and primary years. The contrasting findings between the current study and these previous studies could suggest that gender is not influencing educator-child relationships in the birth to 3 years age group due to fewer gender-specific behaviours being evident. For example, while some studies suggest that children are capable of identifying their own gender from 18 months onwards (for example Stennes et al., 2005), gender-specific behaviours and stereotypes are
considered to be more predominant the preschool years (Giles & Heyman, 2005). In this way, behaviours typically associated with males (rough/physical aggression) or females (nice/relational aggression) (Giles & Heyman, 2005) may not be present in the birth to 3 year old children attending ECEC settings, and therefore would not be influencing the educator-child relationship.

Furthermore, some research has attributed gender difference in educator-child relationships to the higher levels of conflict experienced between males and their educators (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001). These conflicts tend to arise due to educators’ perception that male children are less compliant to their demands and instructions (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001), and that conflict results when educators have to correct or redirect undesirable behaviours (Rudasill, 2011). In the current study, conflict was not often present between children and educators in the birth-to-2 room, but was more present in the 2-to-3 room. Again, this is perhaps an indication that gender-specific behaviours associated with educator-child conflict (hyperactivity, physical aggression and non-compliance) are less common in the birth to 2 age group.

Ultimately, findings suggest that educators in regional ECEC settings are adopting a gender-neutral approach to practice, and are displaying ethical and equitable practice towards all children. As such, educators are modelling behaviours that promote equality. However, the current study cannot determine if these findings would be the same if research were undertaken in the 3 to 5 rooms of ECEC settings.
5.2.3.5 **Vulnerability**

Past research has found that strong educator-child relationships act as a protective factor for vulnerable children (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children are considered vulnerable if they are being raised in an environment where primary carers cannot support their physical and emotional wellbeing (DEECD, 2014). The birth to 3 years age group is broadly defined as vulnerable, as children rely on adults to meet their physical and emotional needs (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children who experience trauma through neglect, abuse and family violence are particularly vulnerable in their development, and so require positive relationships in educational settings (ACF, 2010; CSC, 2007; Briggs, 2012).

In the current study, educators identified vulnerable children as being difficult to form relationships with. Specifically, the description of vulnerable children put forth by educators of the current study suggested these children were vulnerable due maltreatment (DEECD, 2014). For example, educators stated that the physical traits of vulnerable children (arriving to ECEC dirty and unkempt) acted as a deterrent to positive interactions and responsiveness. Also, the lack of information provided to educators from parents of vulnerable children did not facilitate a strong link between home and the ECEC setting, meaning that educators relied on small amounts of information about the child’s life to build relationships upon. As such, educators’ claim that relationships with vulnerable children are not always positive. This perspective towards relationships with vulnerable children opposes the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and NQS (2013b) intention to guide educators in providing quality ECEC to all children; particularly vulnerable children.
The UNCRC (UN, 1990) insists that all children’s rights are being upheld worldwide, and in particular, those children who may be living in environments that class them as vulnerable (DEECD, 2014) require the most support from educators. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and NQS (ACECQA, 2013b) assert the importance of supporting vulnerable children through positive educator-child relationships. Based on the possible neglect, abuse or inconsistency of parenting received in the child’s home, it is of the utmost importance that ECEC educators provide safe, secure and nurturing relationships that can re-establish a child’s sense of trust and security in their world (ACF, 2010). Findings from this research suggest that educators have a limited understanding of the importance of positive relationships with vulnerable children, and how to build these relationships. As such, educators may require additional support in acquiring both a strong knowledge base to inform their work with vulnerable children, and to develop appropriate strategies to support them in the ECEC setting (CSC, 2007). Training in trauma-informed practice could enlighten educators about the unique approach required for working with vulnerable children, which could support educators in building positive relationships with them in ECEC settings.

5.2.4 Educator characteristics

Educators’ characteristics were found to influence the levels of educator-child relationships in the current study, including personality, mental wellbeing and knowledge and training. Educators’ experience working in ECEC setting was also examined, but was not found to influence the educator-child relationship. These findings will now be discussed.
In line with previous research on children’s temperament affecting relationships (Mann & Carney, 2008), the findings derived from the interview data of the current study revealed that educators consider personality to influence the educator-child relationship. In the current study, observations revealed that educators’ unique personalities (introverted or extraverted) dictated patterns of behavioural traits that influenced the educator-child relationship. Extraverted educators appeared to be livelier in their interactions with children, and more positive in their responsiveness; as a result, educators who could be described as ‘extraverted’ were found to interact with children more frequently and robustly. This finding supports previous research, which identified extraversion as an effective teacher personality trait (Fisher & Kent, 1998; Rushton et al., 2007). These projects used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (1985), which identifies 16 different personality types made up of 8 traits, to determine educators’ unique personality type. However, the current study relied on naturalistic observation to inform general personality types segregated into only two categories: 1) introverted and 2) extraverted. Fisher and Kent (1998) note that while extraverted teachers were found to be considered higher quality teachers, personality type alone does not dictate quality teaching, and educators require a large repertoire of interpersonal and pedagogical skills to provide quality learning environments. The current study supports this consideration, as personality was not considered to be solely responsible for educator-child relationship quality in the sample. For example, it was not the case that high levels of educator-child relationships were attributed to educators who could be described as having an extraverted personality type. Rather, a combination of factors (including the child’s ECEC attendance, routine transition...
times, staff-to-child ratios and so forth) all contributed to the quality of educator-child relationships. In this way, relying on an educator’s personality and individual traits and qualities is not the only factor in providing children with quality relationships in ECEC. Churchill (2003) supports this notion, and posits that a match in temperament or personality should be considered an approach for supporting quality in ECEC.

Similar to the findings relating to temperament, it can be considered that different personality types will prefer similar personality types. In this way, as with temperament, matching personality types between educators and children could promote effective interactions and responsiveness to support the development of positive educator-child relationships. The impact of educators’ personality on quality ECEC has implications for recruitment practices in Australian ECEC settings, and the MBTI could be used to determine potential educators’ personality, effectively positioning them in rooms with children who would most benefit from their particular personality traits. For example, extraversion promotes enthusiasm, energy, spontaneity and curiosity, and would be well-suited to all age groups (Colker, 2008); on the other hand, introverted personality traits denote a calm, nurturing and stable presence, which would be ideal in the infant and toddler room (Erikson, 1950).

5.2.4.2 Mental wellbeing

Educators in the current study stated that their mood and mental wellbeing had a direct impact on the quality of their relationships with children, and impacted on their ability to provide nurturing responses to children. Previous research supports these findings related to educators’ perspectives, in that when educators’ mental wellbeing is not optimal it has a negative influence on educator-child
relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Dungan & Zinser, 2004). Hamre and Pianta (2006) suggest that when educators have depression, they are less responsive and sensitive towards children. This was found to be the case in the current study, with one educator describing herself as emotionally unavailable at times due to her pre-existing mental illness. In the birth to 3 years age group, children are particularly sensitive to educators’ responses to their needs (Bowlby, 1969), and so educators affected by poor mental wellbeing put children at risk of unpredictable and potentially harsh educator-child relationships, affecting the climate of the ECEC setting through heightened levels of stress (Pattinson et al., 2014). It was not observed in the current study whether or not the ECEC setting had mechanisms for counteracting the effects of educators feelings of depressing, for example, relief staff that could take over for an educator who required respite due to mental wellbeing issues.

Pre-existing mental wellbeing conditions aside, it is known that ECEC settings can cause stress in children and educators (Pattinson et al., 2014), due to demanding and onerous tasks and responsibilities that persist throughout the day. Many educators experience psychological stress due to being overworked and overcommitted to their role (Corr et al., 2015). Stress has significant impacts on cognitive processes and responses to everyday situations (Sims et al., 2006). The concern stemming from the findings of the current study is that when educators’ mental wellbeing is not optimal, it can have a negative influence on educator-child relationships through detached and non-responsive behaviours (as articulated by educators during the interviews). In this way, educators would not be capable of
meeting the EYLF guidelines to provide nurturing responses to children that support their development and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).

The Australian government has a great deal of focus on promoting and supporting children’s wellbeing (ACECQA, 2013b; DEEWR, 2009), however equal weight may not be given to promoting and supporting educators’ mental wellbeing (Corr et al., 2015). Educators are required to undergo a Working With Children Check, a police check (ACECQA, 2013a) and in some cases, physical examination to prove a level of physical wellbeing, to determine suitability for undertaking work with children in ECEC settings. However, no known mental wellbeing check is a prerequisite for working with young children in Australia. This is potentially harmful, given the impact of mental wellbeing on educators’ ability to provide sensitive and nurturing responsiveness to children, and the potential negative impact educators’ poor mental wellbeing poses to the development of positive educator-child relationships. One way to ensure educators are mentally fit to work with children could be for educators to undergo a mental wellbeing assessment before commencing work in the field. Those educators who are at risk of poor mental wellbeing could then be provided with support from their organisation in the form of socio-emotional strategies (ARACY, 2010). Also, Howes and Hamilton (1993) suggest that educators must engage in reflective practice when it comes to their impact on relationships with children, and make efforts to improve their practice, which can be applied to their levels of mental wellbeing.

5.2.4.3 Educators’ experience and knowledge in the ECEC field

Findings from the current study revealed no influence on educator-child relationships based on varying years (between 6-to 16 years) of work experience of
the educators (N = 10), which is consistent with previous studies which reveal that
more years working in the field does not result in higher quality educator
performance, especially in emotional nurturing of children (Honig & Hirallal, 1998;
Howes et al., 1992). Furthermore, the current study findings lends support to Howes
et al (1992) assertion that quality ECEC relies less on educators’ years of experience,
and more on their level of education. The current study therefore contributes to the
notion that quality ECEC does not solely rely on the years of experience or
qualification level, but rather educators’ own pedagogy and ability to provide quality
ECEC environments that support and nurturing children’s development and
wellbeing (Elliot, 2006). In this way, educator training and knowledge takes centre
stage in the delivery of quality ECEC, as put forth by the Australian ECEC quality
agenda (COAG, 2009).

Key studies, including the NICHD (2002) and EPPE Project (Sylva et al., 2004),
have highlighted that educators’ qualifications, knowledge and pedagogical
effectiveness have a significant impact on the provision of quality ECEC, resulting in
positive child outcomes. Often in Australia the highest-qualified educator is placed
with the older children in the ECEC setting (Elliot, 2006), even though it is well-
documented that the first 3 years of life are critical for lifelong learning (Shonkoff &
Phillips, 2000). This was also the case in the current study, as the highest
qualification held by educators in the birth-to-3 rooms was a diploma (AQFC, 2013).
The Australian ECEC quality agenda intends to place a bachelor-qualified educator
with the birth to 3 years age group in the year 2022 (COAG, 2009), which is certainly
necessary as educators working with infants and toddlers seem to require more
formal training to be effective (Howes et al., 1992). Until that time, educators
working with infants and toddlers rely on knowledge and training at a diploma level, which may not be enough to support their work with children of this age.

Educators of the current study had not undertaken specific training relating to the development of educator-child relationships. Past studies have asserted the need for educators to have specific knowledge and training in relation to how to develop and maintain positive educator-child relationships (Burchinal et al., 2002; Riley, 2011), particularly educators who work with birth to 3 year old children (Bagdi & Vacca, 2006). In particular, working with this age group requires a keen understanding of attachment theory (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008), so that educators are able to adjust their responses and interactions to suit children as they exhibit attachment behaviours and move through attachment phases (Bowlby, 1969). In the current study, no educator discussed attachment behaviours, attachment phases or attachment classifications. This indicates that educators may be unaware of these key issues in attachment theory, which could provide an indication of why some educators responded inappropriately or ineffectively to children’s attachment behaviours, and why educator-child relationships were only found at a satisfactory (rather than high) level. Educators’ practice in building positive relationships through appropriate responsiveness to attachment behaviours could benefit from some specific training focused on attachment in the birth to 3 years age group.

The current study found that educators are drawing from their professional knowledge, more than years of experience, to inform their ability to build educator-child relationships. Educators’ knowledge and professional skills are a product of their diploma qualification (AQFC, 2013), which provides them with sector-specific skills and knowledge, despite being perhaps limited as concerns appropriate practice
specifically focused on children birth to three years old. The EYLF further supports educators’ practice in building relationships in general; however, this framework acts as a guide, rather than a prescriptive document (DEEWR, 2009), and therefore may not be informing educators practice in significant ways. In relation to the current study, it can be suggested that further training specifically focused on informing educators of attachment theory and appropriate practice for working with infants and toddlers could support educators in improving the level of educator-child relationship found within the sample.

As it pertains to the current study, it is asserted that regional areas of Victoria, Australia, present difficulties when it comes to positioning highly trained educators in ECEC and school settings (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015), and findings of the current study corroborate this position, as no educator had undertaken relationship-based training, or training relating to the birth to 3 years age group. The nature of ECEC in regional areas of Australia hinges on the fact that the further away a person is from metropolitan areas, the less access they have to basic services; this can be applied to training opportunities. While educators in the current study had not undertaken specific training relating to relationships or birth-to-3 specific practice, the availability of such training packages being offered in regional areas could prompt participation.

5.2.5 **Summary of RQ2 Discussion**

The current study found 13 factors that influence educator-child relationships in ECEC settings. These insights support five key findings:

1) Responsiveness was found to be the main factor that influences educator-child relationships
2) The quantity of time educators have to spend with children in the ECEC setting has a positive influence on educator-child relationships.

3) Overly frequent routine transition times in the ECEC settings have a negative influence on educator-child relationships;

4) Children’s negative internalising and externalising behaviours adversely influence the educator-child relationship; and

5) Establishing positive trust between educators and children, through various acts, has a positive influence on educator-child relationships.

The data also revealed that factors such as gender and educators’ work experience had no influence on educator-child relationships in the birth-to-3 rooms of the ECEC settings. Additionally, factors such as personality, temperament, mental health, child vulnerability and educator-parent relationships are considered to hold a marginal influence on educator-child relationships.

5.3 Discussion of RQ3

5.3.1 Key finding

The key finding revealed from the research was that wellbeing levels of children aged birth to 3 years old in regional ECEC were above satisfactory. The signals that supported these levels of wellbeing were happiness, satisfaction, social interactions and dispositions.

5.3.2 Levels of child wellbeing

Children’s wellbeing levels were found to be above satisfactory in the current study (M = 4.5 out of 5), which is contrast to some literature that suggests that regional children’s wellbeing is at risk (AEDC, 2015; McCallum & Price, 2016).
Children’s high levels of wellbeing were indicative of a variety of environmental and pedagogical influences found in the ECEC settings. Specifically, the environments were designed in a way that enabled children to explore, engage and enjoy their ECEC setting, as stipulated by the Australian EYLF curriculum (DEEWR, 2009). Children in the current study were observed expressing feelings of happiness and satisfaction through engagement with activities and experiences provided to them in the ECEC setting. Furthermore, children were observed making social connections with peers and educators throughout the day. For example, children were engaged in social play on a solitary, parallel and associate level, and children also initiated contact with educators throughout the day. The aforementioned factors are all associated with children developing a positive sense of wellbeing in the early years (DEEWR, 2009; Ebbeck et al, 2015; Graham, 2011; NAEYC, 2009; Rolf & Link, 2007). The importance of wellbeing on children’s life trajectory has been asserted by previous literature, in that it has the potential to maximise children’s learning potential (DECS, 2008).

The high levels of children’s wellbeing found in the current study suggest that the Australian ECEC quality reform agenda has had a positive influence on the ECEC sector, specifically in regional areas of Victoria, with the likelihood of positive outcomes for children (COAG, 2009). A positive wellbeing instils feeling of happiness, self-esteem and agency in young children, giving them the confidence and freedom to explore their environment and develop new knowledge and skills (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF describes specific ways educators can promote children’s wellbeing within the ECEC setting (DEEWR, 2009), and these are closely linked with the RRRWS used to examine children’s wellbeing. As such, this discussion will now focus on the three
signals identified in the RRRWS observation tool: 1) happiness and satisfaction; 2) social functioning; and 3) dispositions. These signals will be discussed as they relate to how findings from the current study link with the ECEC quality agenda by meeting the NQS through the practices outlined in the EYLF.

5.3.2.1 **Happiness and satisfaction**

In the current study, children were found to be happy, which supports Holder’s position that most children are indeed happy (2012). In the ECEC setting, children experienced happiness and satisfaction on a micro-level, meaning in their immediate environment, they engage in meaningful ways with peers and significant adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children’s pursuit of happiness was observed through a hedonic lens, it that children would avoid pain and seek out pleasure through their senses by engaging in a variety of activities and materials (Graham, 2011; Kringelbach & Berridge, 2009). The provision of resources and materials was found to satisfy children’s pursuit of happiness, indicating that educators are considering the individual strengths, needs and interest of children in order to develop appropriate environments and curriculums that support children’s wellbeing. This finding suggests that educators’ practice is adhering to the national Curriculum, where the EYLF stipulates that educators must plan to meet the needs of individual children to support child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009).

One way of supporting children’s feelings of happiness and satisfaction in the ECEC settings was found in educators’ willingness to allow children to manipulate resources and materials, which links with the EYLF in a meaningful way, as this practice promotes a child-led curriculum and fosters autonomy (DEEWR, 2009). Young children are notorious for converting the simplest of resources into play
opportunities (Arthur et al., 2015), a classic example being when an infant will rattle a set of keys in order to experience pleasure through their senses. Children were found to be quite proficient in converting resources into happiness through manipulation and imagination; they often explored resources and materials in ways that went beyond the intended purpose of the resource (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). For example, children could take a bucket and spade out of the sandpit and use them to catch insects or bugs in the yard. This type of resource conversion served to promote children’s happiness, as this level of autonomy empowers children’s sense of self and rewards creative thinking in a way that fosters their identity and wellbeing (Arthur et al., 2015; DEEWR, 2009). The ability for children to convert resources into happiness is somewhat mediated by the educator’s willingness to allow this in the ECEC setting. In the current study, the way children used the provided resources and materials was monitored, and most often children’s attempts at manipulating resources and materials were facilitated; only occasionally were they curbed in favour of the intended use. Educators’ willingness to allow children to manipulate resources and materials within the ECEC environment is therefore considered to support children’s wellbeing, as stipulated in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

Children’s ability to be autonomous in their pursuit of happiness and satisfaction was multifaceted in the current study. Educators’ facilitated children’s exploration by designing the ECEC environment with age-appropriate resources and furniture that captured children’s inquisitive nature and promoted social engagement. However, what children ‘have’ in the environment does not necessarily dictate their agency, in that their options are limited by the freedom they have to choose what to do with those resources. In this case, there were some caveats
placed on children’s pursuit of happiness within the ECEC setting, and these tended to be based on personal safety consideration. For example, children in the birth to 2 year old rooms were sometimes observed attempting to climb furniture, both indoors and outdoors. While children were clearly seeking pleasure through challenging and exploring their physical capabilities, educators were vigilant in preventing activities that posed physical risks to children, which is common practice in Australian ECEC settings (Little & Wyver, 2008).

The practice of restricting risk taking play is indicative of past perspectives on supporting children’s wellbeing from a purely physical safety aspect (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Resnick, 1995); a perspective that is shifting in the ECEC sector in favour of supporting children wellbeing through indicators of satisfaction and pleasure (Ebbeck et al., 2015; Graham, 2011; Statham & Chase, 2010). While it is clearly a focus of all educators to support the health and safety of young children in ECEC settings (ACECQA, 2013b), notable literature suggests that children must be free to take risks within their environment in order to support their wellbeing through agency, autonomy and satisfaction (Arthur et al., 2015; Little & Wyver, 2008). It is understandable that educators may not know where the line is between optimal safety precautions and pivotal risk-taking, as the Australian regulations enforce a strict urgency in the educators’ focus on providing a physically safe environment for children (ACECQA, 2013a), while the EYLF asserts the importance of challenging children and giving them choice in their endeavours (DEEWR, 2009). The disconnect in government documents needs to be addressed in order to establish a level of certainty for educators’ practice in their drive to provide children with quality ECEC and support children’s wellbeing outcomes.
Children’s emotional expressions of happiness and satisfaction were found within the current study, evidenced by exhibition of humour, enthusiasm, vitality and spontaneity (DECS, 2008). Children’s freedom to express these vibrant signals of happiness and satisfaction indicates the ECEC settings were supporting children’s wellbeing by not only providing for their needs and interests, but also by promoting a positive emotional climate where they feel safe and secure enough to freely exhibit feelings of pleasure, or pain. These practices are in line with the EYLF, which guides educators’ practice towards supporting children’s feelings of happiness and satisfaction in the ECEC setting by acknowledging the individuality of each child, sharing in children’s experiences and promoting a sense of belonging in the setting (DEEWR, 2009).

Ensuring the ECEC setting supports children’s feelings of happiness and satisfaction seems to rely on several factors, including a thorough understanding of children’s individual needs, strengths and interests, along with providing children with opportunities to master their sense of agency, autonomy and identity through abstract manipulation of the environment and resources. Furthermore, educators should manage appropriate risk-taking behaviours in a way that affords children the freedom to explore the environment in the way that serves to enhance their unique skills and drives. In this way, children are able to discover what drives them, what they are capable of and what they enjoy, which will support their attainment of wellbeing.

Ultimately, the findings of the current study suggest that children in regional ECEC settings are experiencing happiness and satisfaction through their engagement
in the ECEC setting. This has implications for the development of their wellbeing, which is an outcome of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

5.3.2.2 **Social functioning**

The current study found that children exhibited social competencies appropriate to their age and stage of development (NAEYC, 2009), in that they sought social companionship constantly in the ECEC setting, either with their peers or with the educators. This finding supports the tenets of attachment theory, which states that children are pre-programmed with social traits that serve to foster a secure attachment with significant others (Bowlby, 1969). While children’s social skills are immature and still developing in the birth to 3 years age group (Berk & Meyers, 2016), basic proximity-seeking behaviours that promote social functioning were evident, including calling out, following and mutual gaze (Bowlby, 1969). Children’s positive social functioning within the ECEC setting indicates that children feel safe and supported in their environment, and that the educators and ECEC setting promotes connectedness and enhances belonging (DHA, 2013). This demonstrates that regional ECEC settings are working in line with the EYLF, which stipulates that educators provide children with opportunities for social development in a safe and secure environment (DEEWR, 2009).

Educators’ supported children’s social interactions through models of prosocial behaviours. In line with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and Code of Conduct (ECA, 2009), educators’ mannerisms demonstrated care, empathy and respect for children, staff and families. Furthermore, educators would often use rich language to support children’s social functioning within the room. The influence that educator modelling has on children’s social development is said to be significant (Kostelnik et
al., 2015) and so the current study findings suggest that while children in the birth-to-2 year room may not have acquired all necessary social skills, they are certainly in a good position to do so due to the pro-social behaviours they observe from their educators. Furthermore, educators provided opportunities for children to be social by providing small to large group activities at least once every day. These group activities were a hotbed of social interaction, and the most meaningful interactions captured by the naturalistic observations in the birth-to-2 room were found during group times. During these, children were able to practice turn-taking, identity, decision making, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, which are essential skills for social functioning (Kostelnik et al., 2016). The EYLF supports the inclusion of group activities in the ECEC setting (DEEWR, 2009), and therefore educators were found to be adhering to the national curriculum in a way that supports children’s wellbeing through social functioning.

Social altercations amongst the children in the current study were observed somewhat frequently, and this finding was to be expected due to the limited social skills and emotional regulation abilities in the birth to 3 years age group (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Porter, 2016). In the ECEC setting children were well-protected from harassment and harm through educators’ intervention in social conflict, thereby providing children with a sense of safety and security in their environment and freedom to explore. Educators would intervene when children experienced social conflict, and this had varying degrees of success depending on the approach educators used (i.e. guidance versus controlling).
5.3.2.3 **Dispositions**

Arthur and colleagues (2015) states that desirable dispositions are an essential pre-requisite for children’s successful learning in a rapidly changing world. Findings from the current study revealed children had curious and positive dispositions, which is characteristic of a positive sense of wellbeing (Graham, 2011). Children’s habitual practices deriving from a desirable disposition – an example of which Moyles (2012) offered, ‘helpful’ - and were found to contribute to their overall learning and wellbeing, through enthusiastic engagement within the ECEC setting. In this way, based on the findings from the current study, it can confidently be asserted that children in regional Victoria ECEC settings have dispositions that will promote their learning in the early years, despite having been described by past literature and research as at risk of developmental vulnerability and limited educational outcomes (AEDC, 2015). This disconnect between recent AEDC data 2015) and the current study is cause for consideration. As findings from the current study suggest that from birth to 3 years of age children acquire the necessary dispositions for learning, there appears to be a disconnect between early predictors of positive child outcomes (positive dispositions) and children’s life trajectory (developmentally and educationally vulnerable). The current study puts forth two points that need further consideration: 1) why regional children’s outcomes tend to be worse than their metropolitan counterparts? and 2) at what point in life do regional children start to decline in their learning and development? Children’s ecological systems would be a good place to start, as family and community models of educational pursuits could influence children’s own.
The EYLF clearly states that educators adopt specific principles and follow specific practices that serve to promote child outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). The NAEYC (2009) asserts that educators must consider whether their practice is empowering or undermining children’s dispositions, and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly to promote children’s positive dispositions, and in turn their learning and wellbeing. Educators were observed to promote positive dispositions in children, such as curiosity, persistence and enthusiasm, while also managing to curb undesirable dispositions, including intolerance and impatience. This type of educator practice is considered by the NAEYC (2009) appropriate in supporting children to become effective learning and promote children’s wellbeing. Furthermore, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) suggests that educators guide children to develop positive dispositions that encourage learning. In this way, educators’ practice in the current study was found to support children’s sense of wellbeing through appropriate management and encouragement of children’s desirable dispositions.

5.3.3 Summary of RQ3 discussion

Children in regional ECEC settings were found to have above satisfactory levels of wellbeing. These findings suggest that educators are adhering to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the Australian Early Childhood Code of Ethics (ECA, 2009), which guide them to create nurturing ECEC environments that foster a positive sense of wellbeing in children. Findings support the efforts of the ECEC quality reform agenda (COAG, 2009), and suggest that children will acquire a positive sense of wellbeing through their engagement in ECEC.
5.4 Discussion of RQ4

5.4.1 Key finding

The main finding derived from RQ4 was that there is a significant link between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing.

Educators’ responding to children in ways that nurture the uniqueness of children’s wellbeing and identity, and allowing them to develop autonomy through guidance and secure base/safe haven, was found to promote positive educator-child relationships.

5.4.2 Relationship and wellbeing correlation

Findings revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between educator-child relationship levels and children’s wellbeing levels (r = .22, n = 92, p < .005), indicating that there is a link between educator-child relationship and child wellbeing levels. This study therefore supports both national and international ECEC curriculum and accreditation frameworks that stipulate the link between relationships and wellbeing, and the prominent position these two facets of ECEC play in the drive for quality ECEC (COAG, 2009; DEEWR, 2009; DCSF, 2008; SMoE, 2013; NAEYC, 2009; NZMoE, 1996).

With findings from the current study supporting national and international perspectives on the link between relationships and wellbeing, educators in ECEC settings must ensure they, too, understand this connection, in order to strengthen their practice in delivering high quality education and care to children from birth to 3 years of age. Equal weight must be placed on supporting relationships and wellbeing in the ECEC setting, and this practice can be guided through the ECA Code of Ethics.
These three documents all assert the importance of building positive, responsive relationships with children in order to support wellbeing. As such, educators are required to engage with ethical practice that upholds children’s rights, and work towards supporting wellbeing as an essential child outcome.

The significant interplay found between educator-child relationships and child wellbeing levels in the current study is well supported by past literature, which has found that positive educator-child relationships foster children’s resilience (Arend et al., 1979), self-esteem (Rolfe & Link, 2011), and emotional regulation (Howes, 2000a), which are all important indicators of social functioning (Fleer, 2014). This in turn was a signal of wellbeing in the current study (DECS, 2008). Furthermore, past studies have found that positive educator-child relationships are a strong predictor of positive social development in young children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001).

The aforementioned studies relate to older children, while the current study focused on children from birth to 3 years of age; still, the findings remain consistent and confirm the link between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing, specifically in relation to social functioning. In this case, a stronger focus must be placed on supporting children’s wellbeing through the development of their social functioning right from birth, rather than waiting until children reach preschool age, where they exhibit more socialised behaviours (Fleer, 2014). Findings of the current study indicate that one way to support children’s social functioning through wellbeing is by establishing positive educator-child relationships, as is stipulated by the Australian ECEC policy and curriculum documents (ACEQCA, 2013b; DEEWR,
2009; DET, 2016). Past research suggests that children rely on educators to guide their social functioning (Robertson, 2016), and findings from the current study supports this assertion. Accordingly, it would be beneficial for educators to have a strong focus on supporting children’s social functioning from birth, through intentional teaching, as described in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

Children’s wellbeing was found to be positively influenced when educators sustained positive interactions that resembled affection and genuine care. When educators demonstrated to children that they were happy with them in some way, by clapping or smiling at their efforts, children would reciprocate this expression of happiness. Furthermore, when educators were providing nurturing responsiveness to children throughout the day, children’s engagement in the ECEC denoted confidence, happiness and social functioning. These educator-child practices are strongly linked with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and other international curriculum documents (DCFS, 2008; SMoE, 2012; NAEYC, 2009; NZMoE, 1996) that describe the importance of educator-child relationships for children’s wellbeing. In this way, findings from the current study suggested that there is a significant interplay between educator-child relationships and children’s wellbeing, and so this message needs to continue to be promoted to educators in the drive for quality ECEC and positive child outcomes.

5.4.3 Summary of RQ4 Discussion

The findings from the current study indicate that children’s wellbeing is linked to the relationship they hold with their educator in ECEC in a meaningful way, and as such the birth to 3 years age group should be a focus for research that informs policy and practice.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Vignette 6.1 illustrates an apparent lack of connection experienced in some educator-child relationships. The personal reflection journey vignettes are not data from the current study, but rather an amalgamation of the researcher’s educator-child relationship experience over her nine years teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. These vignettes aim to enliven the text narrative and set the scene to explore the research issue.

**Vignette 6.1 Personal reflection journey: Part 5**

I lock my car door and walk towards the ECEC building. As I walk, I wonder what the day will bring. I reflect on the children in attendance on this day, and a smile comes to my face. I feel warmth, affection and excitement at the thought of seeing the children. I walk into the building, put my bag in the staffroom then make my way to the infant/toddler room. As I open the door, the children look in my direction. I see smiles on all of their faces, and I smile warmly back. ‘Hello, my friends!’ I exclaim, and drop down to my knee in preparation for children who want to be greeted with a cuddle. I feel so fortunate to work in a field where I get to forge nurturing bonds with young children. I can be a significant person to each of these children – the relationship I develop with children can influence their outcomes.
6.1 Educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year old

The current study investigated educator-child relationship levels and wellbeing levels of children from birth to 3 years old within a regional context in Victoria, Australia. Factors that are found to influence educator-child relationships within ECEC settings were also investigated, as well as examining the link between educator-child relationships and wellbeing of infants and toddlers. This research is considered timely and relevant due to the Australian ECEC quality agenda reform (COAG, 2009), as this reform identifies educator-child relationships as a key quality area of the National Quality Standards (NQS) (ACECQA, 2013b), and child wellbeing as an outcome of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Findings from the current study can therefore inform quality ECEC practice, specifically relating to children from birth to 3 years in regional Victoria, Australia.

The current study found that children from birth to 3 years in regional Victoria are experiencing satisfactory relationships with their educators (M = 3.5 out of 5). These satisfactory relationships are considered to be neither supportive nor unsupportive, with a focus on functionality and meeting children’s physical needs (such as fatigue, hunger, thirst and toileting) rather than emotional needs (such as affection, love and belonging). While satisfactory levels of educator-child relationships signifies that educators in regional ECEC settings are adhering to NQS of quality ECEC practice (ACECQA, 2013b), there is room for improvement.

Educator-child relationships in the current study were found to be positively influenced by educator responsiveness (particularly when educators were emotionally responsive), developmentally appropriate practice, the establishment of trust, positive educator-parent relationships, and quantity of time spent in the ECEC
setting per week. Despite the weight positive interactions with children hold on educator-child relationships (DEEWR, 2009), positive interactions and quality verbal exchanges were not as evident in the data as expected. This indicates that educators may need more support in their current practice when it comes to ensuring plenty of sustained positive interactions and quality verbal exchanges with children in the ECEC setting, in order to support positive relationships.

Factors found to have a negative influence on educator-child relationships in the current study included frequent routine transition times that monopolised educators' time and attention, poor educator-parent relationships, responses to children’s negative internalising and externalising behaviours, child vulnerability, educators’ poor mental wellbeing and lack of educator training specific to building relationships with the birth to 3 year old age group. These factors could be addressed through concerted efforts to improve educators' practice, and recommendations on how this can be achieved have been identified in Section 6.3.

Factors that were found to be moderately influential in the educator-child relationship include children’s temperament and educators’ personality. These findings demonstrated an intricate interplay between matching temperament and personality types in order to have a positive influence on relationships. Factors examined that were found to have no influence on the educator-child relationship include child gender and educators’ years of experience working in ECEC settings.

The current study found that children attending regional ECEC setting have above satisfactory levels of wellbeing, informed by happiness and satisfaction, social functioning and dispositions. This finding suggests that the Australian ECEC quality
reform agenda (COAG, 2009) is contributing to positive child wellbeing through effective implementation of regulations, policy and curriculum focus.

Finally, the current study found a significant link between educator-child relationships and child wellbeing, in that when relationship levels are high, so are levels of wellbeing. This finding supports the assertion of national (ACECQA, 2013; COAG, 2009; DEEWR, 2009; DET, 2016) and international (DCSF, 2008; NAEYC, 2009; NZMoE, 1996; SMoE, 2013) policy and curriculum documents that stipulate the significant interplay between relationships and wellbeing; therefore, it supports the focus on promoting children’s wellbeing through positive educator-child relationships.

6.2 Recommendations

The findings of the current study prompt an array of informed recommendations for both practice and further research in the ECEC field that would inform ECEC quality in regional Australia. The recommendations, derived from the findings of this research, are offered for consideration as follows.

6.2.1 For policy

Staff-to-child ratios

As far as staff-to-child ratios are concerned, the issue may have reached an impasse. Regulations that were implemented across ECEC settings recently have seen the staff-to-child ratio in the birth to 3 year age group drop from 1:5 to 1:4. A lower staff-to-child ratio was credited by educators as having a positive impact on their relationships with children, as it may imply an opportunity for educators to spend more time with each child. However, they would still prefer to see the ratios
lowered in the youngest age group (birth to 2 years) to 1:3. Educators described this as a necessity, due to the high demands of infants. One-on-one interactions, time spent on routines practices, and responsiveness will all be better catered for with lower staff-to-child ratios. The Australian government needs to consider this as a worthwhile investment for children, as the benefits of high quality relationships are well known for their influence on children’s development and wellbeing (Howes, 2000a; Pianta et al., 2002; Shonkoff, 2006). Funding and ECEC child placements will clearly be an obstacle when considering this as a possibility.

6.2.2 For practice

**ECEC attendance**

Child care attendance was found to influence the educator-child relationships, in that the more days children attend ECEC setting the better their relationship with their educator, which has been found in previous studies (Goossens & Van Ijzendoorn, 1990; Howes, 1988). The most recent statistical data (ABS, 2011) reports that Australian children’s ECEC attendance has been increasing dramatically over time. While some research has suggested that high attendance in ECEC can have damaging affects on children (Belsky, 2001), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) asserts that positive educator-child relationships act as a protective factor against the negative outcomes associated with ECEC attendance in the early years.

In regards to the number of days children attend ECEC per weeks, parents need to consider the benefits of sending their child to ECEC more than once or twice per week, as this research supports previous studies (Goossens & Van Ijzendoorn, 1990) that have found the more time children spend in ECEC settings, the better
relationship they will likely have with their educators. This, in turn, provides them with all of the benefits of positive educator-child relationships (e.g. strong sense of wellbeing, confidence to explore) described continuously in this thesis (see Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5). Based on the findings of this study, it would be more beneficial to children’s development and wellbeing to not attend ECEC at all, rather than only once or twice per week, particularly poor quality settings where children can be found to experience detrimental outcomes from ECEC attendance.

**Routine transition times**

One of the key findings of the current study was that frequent routine transition times in the birth to 3-year rooms disrupt educators’ ability to provide nurturing responsiveness to children and prevent sustained positive play interactions between educator and child, thereby having a negative influence on their relationship. It is suggested that educators refrain from overly structuring the birth to 3-year rooms according to strict timelines, and instead manage routine transition times according to individual children’s needs and desires. For example, they may implement progressive mealtimes, where children do not have to leave their play space to eat at a specific time, but rather are empowered to make their own choice about when to eat and when to play. For infants, where these types of choices may not be possible, educators should work closely with families to develop a nurturing routine that supports children’s physical and emotional needs.

**Educator-child relationship training**

**Attachment**

Educators require specific knowledge on attachment when working with children in the birth to 3-year rooms (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009). The current study
supports this notion, and suggests that educators working with infants and toddlers should be required to undertake specific training to equip them with knowledge and skills that may enable them to recognise and appropriately respond to children’s different attachment behaviours, attachment phases and attachment classifications. Knowledge from this type of training will better prepare educators to respond appropriately to the individualised needs of each child.

**Behaviour management**

Attachment training may also provide insight into child behaviours, and support educators’ responses to their undesirable ones, identified in the current study as negative internalised and externalised behaviours. Educators at Diploma level may not have had specific behaviour management training, and so this could impact on effective strategies used to support children’s behaviour in the birth to 3-year rooms. In particular, educators in the current study observed using a guidance approach to support children’s negative internalised (for example, withdrawal) and externalised behaviours (for example, aggression) were more effective in nurturing positive educator-child relationships, as has previously been asserted by Porter (2016). When educators adopted a controlling approach to children’s behaviour, the educator-child relationships was found to suffer. Therefore, providing educators with specific training on effective ways to guide children’s behaviour in ECEC settings could serve to improve educator-child relationships and child wellbeing.

**Goodness of fit model**

The current study found children’s temperament to influence the educator-child relationship, as has previous research (De Schipper et al., 2008; Rudasill & Rim-Kaufman, 2009; Vermeer & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008). Similarly, educators’
personality traits were found in the current study to influence educator-child relationships. Along the lines of Chess and Thomas (2012), it was concluded that matching temperament types and personality types would be beneficial to the educator-child relationship in ECEC settings. It is therefore recommended that children’s temperament and educators’ personality be a consideration in the organisation and allotment of staffing and child placement in ECEC settings. Ideally, ECEC coordinators should aim to arrange educators’ work with an age group that suits their personality, although all of them should have appropriate and professional training before starting their job. This ‘goodness of fit’ arrangement can be achieved firstly by identifying educators’ personality type using the MBTI (1985), and then by identifying children’s temperament, concluding with a suitable matching between educators and children. A strong level of synergy between educators and children may support a harmonious emotional climate that serves to foster educator-child relationships, child wellbeing and learning.

**Mental wellbeing check**

Educators’ mental wellbeing was found to influence the educator-child relationship. Specifically, educators’ negative mental wellbeing contributed to harsh or detached responses to children’s social cues and attachment behaviours, which negatively influenced the educator-child relationship. Given the potential harm of educators’ negative mental wellbeing on children, a mental wellbeing check could be conducted when hiring educators to work with children—particularly in the birth to 3-year room, where infants and toddlers are particularly vulnerable and reliant on adults. Furthermore, educators are encouraged to look after and monitor their mental wellbeing, to ensure they are capable of delivery quality ECEC to all children.
in their setting. Additionally, all educators working in ECEC settings should provide one another with collegial support and promote positive mental wellbeing. In particular, ECEC coordinators should have strategies in place to identify educators who might be at risk of negative mental wellbeing, and provide appropriate guidance and support for those educators. Furthermore, there should be a mechanism for educators to disclose this information in order to gain support in dealing with mental wellbeing issues.

**Reflective practice**

The use of the RRRRS as a reflective instrument is also considered to be a relevant recommendation for educators in the field (DECS, 2008). The ability to monitor levels of educator-child relationships within the ECEC setting would allow educators to identify areas of strengths and weakness in their approach to building and maintaining positive educator-child relationships. Also, identifying children’s wellbeing levels could inform educators of the functionality and quality of the room, and how their ECEC setting is supporting children’s wellbeing. Furthermore, undertaking reflective practice using the RRRRS may support ECEC settings to prepare for accreditation by collecting ongoing, meaningful and systematic data, as relationships are identified as NQS quality outcome number 5 (ACECQA, 2013b) and EYLF child outcome number 3 (DEEWR, 2009).

**6.2.3 For further research**

It was identified in this research, through quantitative methods, that educator-child relationships and child wellbeing are linked. What was not discovered, however, was which factor impacted upon the other. Do the levels of children’s wellbeing impact on how educators interact with them, thereby
influencing the levels of educator-child relationships? Or rather, do the level of
children’s relationship with their educator influence them in such a way that their
levels of wellbeing are affected? This is an important question for researchers,
especially when it comes to the birth to 3 years age group, as this is a critical period
of development that is strongly influenced by relationships (Shonkoff & Phillips,
2000) and sets the foundation for wellbeing (Ebbeck & Yim, 2008). By identifying
which element is influencing the other (relationships or wellbeing) a sharper focus
could be introduced for educators’ quality practice, in that educators could work on
building one in order to build the other. It is therefore recommended that research
begin in this area.

Further research could also widen its scope when it comes to identifying
what is contributing to the relationships educators have with children. Taking into
consideration variables such as home environment, parenting styles, attachment
styles, socio-economic status, health, nutrition, and birth order may provide further
insight into educator-child relationship issues in ECEC setting. Attempting to identify
how people establish positive relationships is certainly an enormous task, but one
that could have real significance in the lives of young children.

The current study also found that children’s wellbeing in regional Victoria was
above satisfactory levels, which opposes common assertions that children living in
regional areas are at risk of poor educational outcomes, low levels of wellbeing and
high levels of delinquency in later years (Baxter et al., 2011; McCallum & Price,
2016). Children’s wellbeing levels were found to be high in three signals (i.e.
happiness and satisfaction social functioning and dispositions). Such high levels
suggest that regional children from birth to 3 years old are on track for positive life
trajectory and outcomes, and yet this is not found in research undertaken on regional children in later years. Research needs to be undertaken to determine what impacts upon children’s wellbeing in the early years may derail this positive life trajectory, in the form of a longitudinal studies to track children’s wellbeing over time. Through this research, appropriate intervention strategies can be put in place to support regional children.

6.3 Limitations and strengths of the research

To understand and openly acknowledge the research strengths and limitations allows the project to go ahead in a transparent and confident manner, and ensures research integrity (Creswell, 2014). Highlighting the strengths of the research provides insight into innovative and effective research methodology and findings that can be used to drive further research in the field. This section addresses the strengths and limitations of this investigation considered to be pertinent by the researcher, so as to expose all aspects of the study.

6.3.1 Limitations

*Insider research*

The regional aspect of this research gives it strength, but it may also act as a limitation. The regional perspective offered through this case study gives a unique understanding of the experience of young children living in regional Victoria, Australia (320 kilometres from regional Melbourne). The selected regional context is an area of research struggling to find weight in Australia. In order to undertake such an intense and sometimes intimate look at regional settings, a researcher must understand his or her visibility in the area.
The current study was undertaken in the hometown of the researcher. In this case, the researcher could be considered ‘visible’ to the population, and so this research could be considered ‘insider research’. The term ‘insider research’ refers to a research project in which the researcher has a direct connection with the setting (Robson, 2002). In this way, it can be seen to impact on the researchers’ ability to be an objective outsider, and this can call into question the quality and validity of the findings. This issue tends to be most problematic for researchers using qualitative methodology (Unluer, 2012).

Rooney (2005) raises important questions about insider research, as outlined in Table 6.1. These questions highlight the potential for research findings to be unreliable, biased and deeply affected by existing relationships with participants. Of these issues, the major cause for concern would be the loss of objectivity (Unluer, 2012). A lack of objectivity in research can corrupt the data considerably, and render the research invalid. However, it can be argued that by being aware of the issues presented by undertaking insider research, the researcher can take the necessary steps to avoid them.

The current study addressed each issue outlined by Rooney (2005). Table 6.1 identifies each potential risk of insider research, and how this risk was managed to ensure corruption of the data was avoided:
### Table 6.1: Managing insider research issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Avoidance technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will the researcher’s relationships with subjects have a negative impact on the subject’s behaviour such that they behave in a way that they would not normally?</td>
<td>The researcher positioned herself discreetly within the ECEC setting, in order to reduce the impact of her presence on the participants. No professional relationship was held with any participant at the time of data collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the researcher’s tacit knowledge lead them to misinterpret data or make false assumptions?</td>
<td>The quantitative data was collected objectively by the researcher using standardised observational scales (RRRRS &amp; RRRWS), ensuring that false assumptions and misinterpretations would not be made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The qualitative data was in the form of semi-structured interviews, where the participants gave their answers freely without coercion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naturalistic observations were taken objectively, based on previous training in the ECEC field. The researcher held no prior knowledge about the participants that relates to the research project before or during the collection of data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the researcher’s insider knowledge lead them to make assumptions and miss potential important information?</td>
<td>The researcher maintained a professional stance when collecting data, only documenting what was seen at the time it was seen. Therefore, assumptions based on prior knowledge of the ECEC settings, where applicable, could not influence the collection or analysis of the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the researchers’ politics, loyalties, or hidden agendas lead to misrepresentations?</td>
<td>There were no issues regarding the researcher’s political views, loyalties or hidden agendas. The researcher was transparent in all processes and procedures of the research with all participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the researcher’s moral/political/cultural standpoints lead them to subconsciously distort data?</td>
<td>The researcher’s moral/political/cultural views have had no influence on the collection or analysis of data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


With the possible disadvantages of insider research being addressed and effectively negated in Table 6.1 above, this research confidently moved forward to ensure the validity of the data.

A noteworthy addition to the influence of insider research, Rooney (2005) suggests that there are in fact many advantages, in that insiders have a wealth of knowledge that an outsider would not; additionally, due to intimacy, subjects may...
feel more at ease with an insider, and thereby talk more freely and openly. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) add another advantage of insider research: it does not alter the flow of natural social interactions. These points are often difficult to determine in research projects, and therefore remain only a possibility of insider research, and not the rule.

While the advantages and disadvantages of insider research have been presented here, it is also important to note that outsider research, too, has both advantages and disadvantages (Unluer, 2012). Essentially, it is considered impossible to undertake research that is fully objective (Rooney, 2005); this does not mean, however, that the research and findings will not be valid or reliable. Researchers can minimise the impact of bias on their project by being aware of the issues that can potentially corrupt objectivity, and by making their research transparent. In this case, the researcher was keenly aware of this issue before designing the research. Appropriate precautions were taken to ensure this project was not negatively influenced by the idea of insider research, as presented in Table 6.1. Furthermore, the researcher identified the position of ‘insider research’ to the HEAG and DEECD ethical committee boards. While the researcher was connected with the research location, she had no intimate knowledge of the ECEC settings and participants. It is therefore argued that the notion of insider research did not impact negatively on the research, as preventative measures were taken to ensure the researcher remained unbiased, objective and ethical.

**Research scope**

Another notable limitation of this study is considered to be its restricted scope in the exploration of the issue of child relationships and wellbeing. The study
focused on educator-child relationships within regional ECEC settings, and therefore the investigation was conducted within this environmental scope. Overall, it is argued by the researcher that the data collection methods were appropriate to answer the research questions, and that the scope of the research was fitting with the research issue and design. In this way, valid data was presented that answered the research questions within the selected context.

It needs to be mentioned, however, that the researcher was not oblivious to possible ‘blind spots’ or ‘gaps’ in the data collection. Of the plethora of factors that influence the levels of educator-child relationships, many could not be addressed for a number of reasons including time, resources and ethical considerations. In investigating factors that influence educator-child relationships, many areas were under the microscope – personality, temperament, gender, behaviour, time and so on. Conversely, many factors were not investigated, such as the child’s socio-economic status, family construct, parenting styles, siblings, or even previous maltreatment, abuse or neglect at the hands of significant adults. These factors are obviously considered to influence levels of child wellbeing, and to be relevant in how a child develops relationships with significant adults; however, they were considered to be outside the scope of this research project.

The time restraints, resources, setting and literature review contributed to the narrowing of the research scope, making it unfeasible to take a wider research view that could incorporate the aforementioned factors. As such, this information was not sought, and therefore not included, in the research. The researcher maintains that the data provided a strong description of factors that influence educator-child relationships, and child wellbeing, and therefore posits its validity.
Other researchers may consider the possibility of addressing these issues in further studies, in order to establish a broader understanding of other factors that may influence educator-child relationships and wellbeing of children from birth to 3 years of age.

6.3.2 **Strengths**

*Regional research*

The importance of research in regional Australia has been noted in both the introduction and literature review (see Chapters 1 and 2). Understanding of what is happening in regional Australia is necessary to provide balance in research, and enable policymakers to make appropriate decisions and considerations that will support all Australians. The current study was crucial and unique in contributing new knowledge to the ECEC field, as it is the only comprehensive and systematic study on relationships and wellbeing of children under 3 years undertaken in regional Australia. Without such research, regional perspectives are not represented in informing the ECEC sector’s understanding of relationships and wellbeing experienced by children from birth to 3 years in a meaningful way. Therefore, the current study offers insights into ECEC that may support the growth and prosperity of regional areas of Australia.

The Australian ECEC quality reform agenda, and supporting documents (i.e. NQF, NQS, EYLF) does not discriminate between regional and metropolitan ECEC. Children across all contexts are expected to achieve the same outcomes, supported by educators’ practice informed by the same documents. In this way, regional and metropolitan research needs to hold the same weight in informing policy and quality drives.
Attachment and wellbeing are universal principles applicable to all children globally (UNICEF, 1990), and so fundamental universal elements to support children’s relationships with educators need to relate to the entire population. These universal elements should be the focus of all policy, as they are fundamental in supporting children’s learning and development. A universal approach to informing policy development will provide consistency across time and space, thereby enhancing children’s mobility and enabling them to move freely from one context to another, whilst being afforded the same experiences and opportunities.

**Children from birth to 3 years**

A further aspect that strengthens the significance of this research lies within the age group selected – children from birth to 3 years. As pointed out in the literature review in Chapter 2, research in the ECEC field tends to focus on preschool-aged children, with several key studies examining quality ECEC in the preschool space (Sylva et al., 2004; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Furthermore, research focusing on educator-child relationships is also predominantly undertaken on preschool- and primary-aged children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes & Hamilton, 1992b; Howes, 2000a). Research focusing on preschool-aged children leaves a gap in knowledge, and it has previously been mentioned that research on children from birth to 3 years old in Australia is limited (ARACY, 2011). Therefore, this study aimed to contribute unique and critical findings to address this knowledge gap. Without new knowledge that describes a holistic view of childhood experiences and development of children from birth to 3 years old, recommendations that inform quality ECEC may lack meaningfulness. For example, key studies that examine quality ECEC, such as the EPPE project and the Perry Preschool Project, focus on preschool-
aged children; so the question is how meaningful those findings are in informing experiences of children from birth to 3 years old. How do findings from these studies inform educators practice when working with 0- to 3-year-olds? The answer is that projects focusing on preschool quality cannot provide meaningful insights due to the holistic and developmental differences of children from birth to 3 years compared to children 4 to 6 years. It is important to note that children in the birth to 3 years age group are capable learners but particularly vulnerable as well (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When in the ECEC setting, these children are quite dependent on educators to meet their basic and emotional needs (DEEWR, 2009). This, coupled with the fact that neural connections forged in the first years pave the way for lifelong learning (Mustard, 2004), contribute to the importance of this research in informing quality ECEC policy and practice relating to educator-child relationships and child wellbeing. With this in mind, the current study aimed to make a significant contribution to new knowledge in the field of ECEC, specifically related to children from birth to 3 years old.

**Research methods**

Unique to the current study were the methods of obtaining data about the levels of educator-child relationships, i.e. using the RRRRS in conjunction with semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations.

Previous research presented throughout Chapter 2 relied on various methods of determining educator-child relationship quality, one example being educator’s self-assessments. Self-assessment provides insights into educators’ perspectives on their relationships with children, and relies on reflective journals and interviews (Ebbeck & Yim, 2009; Recchia & Loizou, 2002) or other methods, including the
Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1994; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995). Educator self-assessment instruments describe the quality of the educator-child relationship from the educators’ perspective, without any observations that could contribute insights into the nature of this relationship. In this way, self-assessment methods on their own are limited in describing the whole picture of educator-child relationships. Furthermore, there is the risk that educators’ self-assessments may not accurately reflect the educator-child relationship due to bias, as educators may report a socially desirable rather than factual representation of it.

Other studies presented in the literature review (see Chapter 2) adopted observational instruments (Howes, Hamilton & Phillips, 1998; Howes & Smith, 1995), which offer a more objective insight into educator-child relationships, as they measure them through careful observations of behaviours and interactions between educators and children. Common observation instruments that are often used to investigate educator-child relationships include the Strange Situation Classification (Ainsworth, 1978), the Child-Caregiver Observation System (Boller & Sprachman, 1998) and the Attachment Q-Set (Waters & Dean, 1985). While these instruments have all been widely adopted in research projects, none are designed to examine children from birth, and therefore findings derived via these methods cannot shed light on the relationship experiences of children from birth to 3 years old.

The current research adopted the use of a standardised observational scale (RRRRS), semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations to gather data that would inform the levels of educator-child relationships of children from birth to 3 years old. Combining these instruments provided both objective naturalistic
observations, and the educators’ perspectives on relationships, which can be considered to offer a comprehensive insight into the educator-child relationships of the sample (N = 92). In this way, the current study is unique in its approach to investigating educator-child relationships, specifically in the birth to 3 years age group.

6.4 Summary of Chapter 6

This study contributes to a growing body of literature that informed the ECEC sectors understandings of educator-child relationships and child wellbeing. This research also offers critical and unique insight into children from birth to 3 years old living in regional Victoria, Australia.
Reference List


Cooper, K., & White, R. E. (2012). Qualitative research in the post-modern era: Contexts of qualitative research. Canada: Springer.


Department of Education & Training [DET]. (2016). *The Victorian early years learning and development framework: For all children from birth to eight years*. Melbourne: DET.


between gender and aggressive behaviour. *Child Development, 76*(1),107-121.

Girolametto, L., & Weitzman, E. (2002). Responsiveness of child care providers in
interactions with toddlers and preschoolers. *Language, Speech, and Hearing
Services in Schools, 33*, 268-281.

Publication.

curriculum of respectful, responsive, relationship-based care and education*

Goossens, A., & Van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1990). Quality of infants attachments to
professional caregivers: Relation to infant-parent attachment and day-care

Lismore: Setting for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University.


University of Florida: Department of Family, Youth and Community Services.

Hamre, B. K., Hatfield, B., Pianta, R. C., & Jamil. (2013). Evidence for general and
domain-specific elements of teacher-child interactions: Associations with

Hamre, B. K., Hatfield, B. E., Jamil, F., & Pianta, R. C. (2013). Evidence for general and
domain-specific elements of teacher-child interactions: Associations with

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the
trajectory of children’s school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child
Development, 72*(2), 625-638.

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2004). Self-reported depression in nonfamilial
caregivers: Prevalence and associations with caregiver behaviour in child-care


Brownlee, & E. Johansson (Eds.), *Participatory learning in the early years* (Chapter 8). New York: Routledge.


Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). The effective pre-school and primary education project. Final report of the longitudinal study funded by the DfES.


Appendices

A: DEECD ethics approval
B: HEAG ethics approval
C: Third party consent form
D: Participant consent form
E: Organisational consent form
F: Semi-structured interview questions
G: Naturalistic Observation template
Appendix A – DEECD ethics approval

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Strategy and Review Group

2013_001973

Mrs Nicole Kelly
Arts and Education
Deakin University
PO Box 423
WARRNAMBOOL 3280

Dear Mrs Kelly

Thank you for your application of 19 April 2013 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled *An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3’s: A regional perspective.*

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the DEECD approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research.

6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study’s indicative completion date.

7. If DEECD has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department’s Research Register.

[Department of Education and Early Childhood Development logo]

435
Appendix B – HEAG ethics approval

Human Ethics Advisory Group

Faculty of Arts and Education Geelong Waurn Ponds Campus Postal: Locked Bag 20000, Geelong 3220, Victoria, Australia Telephone: 03 5227 2368 Facsimile: 03 5227 2260

Date: 10 May, 2013 Subject: HAE-13-024

An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3’s: A regional perspective

The application for this project has been considered by the Faculty HEAG under the terms of Deakin University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC).

Approval has been given for Mrs Nicole Sarah Kelly, under the supervision of Dr Bonnie Yim, School of Education, to undertake this project from 9/05/2013 to 9/05/2017.

The approval given by the Faculty HEAG is given only for the project and for the period as stated in the approval. It is your responsibility to contact the Faculty HEAG immediately should any of the following occur:

• Serious or unexpected adverse effects on the participants
• Any proposed changes in the protocol, including extensions of time.
• Any events which might affect the continuing ethical acceptability of the project.
• The project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
• Modifications are requested by other HRECs.
In addition you will be required to report on the progress of your project at least once every year and at the conclusion of the project. Failure to report as required will result in suspension of your approval to proceed with the project.

The Faculty HEAG and/or DUHREC may need to audit this project as part of the requirements for monitoring set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

*Kylie Koulkoudinas*  HEAG Secretariat  Faculty of Arts and Education.
Appendix C – Third party consent form

TO: Parents

Third Party Consent Form

Date:

Full Project Title: An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year olds: A regional case study

Principal researcher: Dr Bonnie Yim

Student researcher: Nicole Downes

Reference Number:

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.

I give my permission for ......................................................(name of participant/child) to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement. I have been given a copy of Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my child’s identity and personal details, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

Participant’s Name (printed) ......................................................

Name of Person giving Consent (printed) ......................................................

Relationship to Participant: ......................................................

Signature ...................................................... Date .......

## Appendix D – Participant consent form

![Deakin University Logo]

TO: *Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consent Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Date:**

**Full Project Title:** An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year olds: A regional case study

**Principal Researcher:** Dr Bonnie Yim

**Student Researcher:** Nicole Downes

**Reference Number:**

I have read and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.

I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.

I have been given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

Participant’s Name (printed) .................................................................

Signature .................................................................Date..........................

---

439
Appendix E – Organisation consent form

Organisational Consent Form

TO: The Organisation

Date:

Full Project Title: An investigation of educator-child relationships and wellbeing of under 3-year olds: A regional case study

Principal Researchers: Dr Bonnie Yim

Student Researcher: Nicole Downes

Reference Number

I have read and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.
I give my permission for staff and children of ................................................................. to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.
I have been given a copy of Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.
The researcher has agreed not to reveal the participants’ or organisations identities and personal details if information about this project is published or presented in any public form.

I agree that

1. I / We DO / DO NOT require an opportunity to check the factual accuracy of the research findings related to the institution/organisation.
2. I / We EXPECT / DO NOT EXPECT to receive a copy of the research findings or publications.
Name of person giving consent (printed) .................................................................

Signature .................................................. Date ...........................................

Student Researcher
Nicole Downes
Appendix F – Semi-structured interview questions

Part I: Educators’ background

1. How many years have you been working in early childhood education and care settings?
2. How long have you been working in your current setting?
3. What made you choose a career in early childhood education?

Part II: Educators perspectives on relationships

4. How do you define educator-child relationships?
5. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how important do you believe educator-child relationships are in childcare? Please explain your rating.
6. What factors do you believe impact on the development of educator-child relationships?

Part III: How educators develop relationships

7. What strategies do you use when developing relationships with children?
8. What behaviours do you believe children employ to support their relationships with you?
9. What do you consider to be the most important factor of a positive educator-child relationship developing?
10. What do you consider to be a factor in a negative educator-child relationships developing?

Part IV: How educators view their relationships with children

11. How would you describe the relationships you have with the children in your care?
12. In what ways are your relationships with children different from one another?
13. What do you think is responsible for this difference?
14. When considering a child you have a strong relationship with, what do you think is the cause of that?
15. When considering a child you have a poor relationship with, what do you think is the cause of that?

Demographic information

1. Highest Qualification
   - Certificate III
   - Diploma
   - Degree
   - Other

2. Age:
   - 18-25
   - 26-35
   - 36-45
   - 46-54
   - 55+

3. Age group you work with
   - 0-2
   - 2-3
# Appendix G – Naturalistic Observation template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE:</th>
<th>TITLE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting:</td>
<td>Setting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/ren:</td>
<td>Child/ren:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator:</td>
<td>Educator:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>