Strengthening Relationships among Teachers and Caregivers in Early Care and

Education: A Strategy to Prevent Expulsion

by

Caitlin Meaney

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Ying Chih Chen, Chair
Juliet Hart Barnett
Eva Shivers

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ABSTRACT

Across contexts, researchers have exposed the immense impact that early childhood experiences and high-quality caregiver relationships have on a developing child, which has resulted in much motivation to increase the quality of early care and education (ECE) programs at a national level. Unfortunately, as research has revealed the positive influence that quality ECE has on a child's ultimate outcomes, it has also shed light on a social problem that intricately affects society: preschool expulsion. To address this issue, several interventions have been created, however the teacher-caregiver relationship has yet to be a central point of solution. Therefore, a relational cultural communication training (RCCT) was developed to support teachers as they work with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, and it served as the intervention that was studied in this action research project.

This mixed method action research study (MMAR) sought to examine the constructs of empathy and culture as they pertain to teacher-caregiver relationships from the vantage point of the eight ECE teachers that participated in this project. Specifically, interview transcripts and journals were qualitatively assessed to illuminate teacher perspectives on the roles that both culture and empathy play in relationships with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion. Further, the study examined teacher attitudes towards engaging with caregivers before and after the RCCT intervention using interviews, journals and an evidence-based pre- and post-survey tool as data sources. Bioecological systems theory (BST) and relational cultural theory (RCT) framed the research questions that guided this project.

Results suggested that the RCCT was a useful intervention that supported ECE teachers in their ability to connect with caregivers whose children are at-risk. Particularly, findings revealed that (a) ECE teachers do feel that both empathy and culture influence their ability to connect with caregivers, (b) RCCT was helpful in shifting teacher practices with families from an empathy standpoint, and (c) cultural differences and negative interactions adversely informed a teacher's relational capacity with caregivers, ultimately adversely affecting child outcomes. The discussion of these findings summarizes study conclusions and how they might inform practice, implications for future research and practice, and limitations to consider.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, first and foremost, to every early childhood educator I have had the honor of consulting. Your collective courage, commitment, tenacity and compassion for young children and their wellbeing sparked the fire in me to both begin and ultimately finish this journey. Thank you for changing the world with your love.

Second, I dedicate this work to my dad, John. Your work ethic, grit and honesty has allowed me to recognize what is important in life. You have always told me that the only person you need to be truest to is the person in the mirror, and because of that, I was able to become who I am today and successfully meet this personal goal.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my mom, Rosemary. All that I am, and all that I ever will be, is because of the unconditional love and support you have shown me my entire life. I can't imagine that my heart would ever be so dedicated to such a meaningful cause had I not had you as my compass. I can't thank you enough for showing me how to be a good person. I love you so much.

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Lastly, I want to thank all of my family and friends that have encouraged me to set goals and achieve my dreams not only the last few years, but always. My parents and two brothers have been and always will be my lifeline. And Phil, our adventure is just beginning, and it's been the best one yet- I can't wait to see what's next for us. XO!

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INTRODUCTION

"The biggest risk factor for expulsion is…being young." (W. Gilliam, personal communication, December 2017).

A three-year old lively little African American boy named Isaiah is dropped off at preschool to begin his second month in Miss Jessica's class. As he kisses his mother goodbye, she says to him, "Now remember to have a good day today, not like the other days we have had." Miss Jessica looks up from the sensory table where she is playing with other children, waves to Isaiah's mother in a hurried, anxious state, and looks back down hastily to avoid having to engage in a difficult conversation about Isaiah's behavior this week.

Isaiah has had an incredibly difficult time since first starting preschool. He throws toys when angry, hits teachers and peers when in distress, has started to scratch his own face when nap time arrives, and is seemingly having a difficult time regulating his emotions throughout the day. As a result, Isaiah has been excluded from his natural learning environment and sent to the director's office thirty-one days so far since his start date.

After several attempts by the director and teachers to connect with mother and gather information without success, Isaiah started to get sent home. Unfortunately, Isaiah's narrative of himself is getting clearer every minute: He is a bad boy. He is the boy that gets sent to the director's office every day. He is the boy that gets behavior reports sent home every single day. He is the reason that his mother misses work. He misses prime learning time with his friends. He is a bad boy.

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This is the beginning of Isaiah's journey through the education system. At the ripe age of three, he was expelled from preschool.

Early childhood experiences, which have been of central focus to several theorists and researchers dating back to Freud's seminal work on development, are deemed throughout the literature as the cornerstone and foundation for the rest of a child's life (Felitti et. al, 1998; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The experiences that children have when they are young are the most pivotal in terms of shaping their trajectory, as a child's brain develops more so during the first five years of life in comparison to any other period of life (First Things First, NAEYC, Center on the Developing Child, 2009). Unfortunately, extensive research has suggested that undergoing adverse experiences in childhood is strongly correlated with several maladaptive outcomes in adulthood, ranging from alcoholism and depression to adolescent pregnancy and even heart disease (Felitti et. al, 1998). Over the last decade, there has been an increase in focus on early care and education (ECE) and its impact on child development and childhood outcomes. As researchers have continued to shed light on positive influence of ECE, they have also stumbled upon an adverse childhood experience that is occurring at alarming rates in the United States in these settings: preschool expulsion.

As literature on adverse early childhood experiences and brain development has continued to progress in recent decades (Bick, Zhu, Stamoulis, Fox, Zeanah & Nelson, 2015; Zeanah et al., 2009), so too has the need to critically examine the contexts in which children are experiencing their first years of life. Much of the literature on early childhood experiences has focused solely on primary caregivers and the home

environment (Felitti et al., 1998, McLean et al., 2015; Shackelton, 2015), however recent national trends have revealed that only a mere 30% of children less than a year old are cared for primarily by a parent, and that percentage decreases to 22% among children ages three to four (Child Trends, 2016). Accordingly, the children unaccounted for by those percentages are often being cared for by other caregivers prior to entering kindergarten, and most often by ECE teachers (Child Trends, 2016). The complex problem of preschool expulsion strongly intersects with the capacity of schools to partner with families in ECE programs when it comes to children at-risk, and specifically with a teacher's ability to build relationships with families and caregivers (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti & Shic, 2016).

Walter Gilliam, in his seminal research on preschool expulsion, identified in his brief on ECE policy that further research is needed focused on "family and community factors associated with risk for expulsion, and effective methods for fostering effective preschool-home collaborations." (Gilliam, 2008, p. 8). Similarly, the United States Department of Education and the United States Department of Health and Human Services deemed in their joint 2014 policy statement that "forming strong relationships with parents and families" is an initiative that must be put into action in order to mitigate the issue of preschool expulsion (US Department of Education & US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014, p. 8). Most recently, Gilliam et al. (2016) specifically suggested in their research brief on preschool expulsions and implicit bias that

> Future work in this area should explore the potential protective effects of better
> home-preschool connections and early educators' emotional connectedness to the

parents and families they serve and the impact this may have on preschool expulsions and suspensions (p. 15).

Although these suggestions have been made both at national and state levels, preschool expulsion pervasively persists as a form of discipline for young children. It is therefore necessary that ECE programs enhance their ability to create relationships with caregivers, particularly for children at-risk for expulsion. This action research investigation examines this very topic.

Broad Context

The problem of preschool expulsion is occurring throughout the United States and across all types of preschool settings (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Despite the considerable media attention on the issue, however, "almost no research exists on the topic" (Gilliam, 2005, p. 1). The Children's Defense Fund, in their 2007 report "America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline", suggested that this problem is correlated to several other social issues by stating that "the United States of America does not value and protect all of its children equally or ensure them the basic hope, healthcare, safety, *education* and family supports all children need to achieve a productive future" (p. 14). Gilliam (2005), in his seminal study on preschool expulsion in the United States, identified sobering correlations between preschool expulsion and negative outcomes throughout the remaining trajectory of an expelled-preschooler's life. Preschool children are expelled from ECE programs in the US 3.2 times more often than their K-12 counterparts, and are likely to be at risk for school failure in elementary and secondary education (Gilliam, 2005). Literacy rates and math and reading standardized scores of children in third grade programs are influenced heavily by a child's history within

educational settings, and high school dropout rates are higher for those that experienced negative educational experiences prior. (US Department of Education, 2016). In 2013, nearly 8,000 preschoolers were excluded in some form or another from their natural learning environment, and those numbers have unfortunately continued (US Department of Education, 2016). By 2016, that number had doubled, and nearly 17,000 young children under the age of five were expelled from ECE programs nationally (National Survey of Children's Health, 2016).

Preschool expulsion has the potential to create a rippling effect throughout several systems and, in particular, the criminal justice system. Research suggests that children expelled from preschool are as much as ten times more likely to face incarceration than those children that are not expelled (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Prior studies have also revealed that the annual per child cost for a high quality comprehensive full-day, full-year early childhood education program is $13,000, whereas the average annual per prisoner cost is $22,650 (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). States spend on average almost three times as much per prisoner as per public school pupil (The Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Typically, resiliency factors such as enrollment in school and strong social supports mitigate these statistics, which is why expulsion at the preschool level and teacher-caregiver relationships are directly influencing the current outcomes within both the education system and within several others (Gilliam, 2005).

Since 2005, several state programs have deeply invested in exploring the quality of their early care and education programs (ECE) and their policies surrounding expulsion and suspension. Within one year of Gilliam's report on the nation's preschool expulsions, legislators and organizations in both Alaska and Massachusetts began

requiring data collection on preschool expulsions and initiated pilot intervention strategies to mitigate the issue (Zigler, 2016). In 2007, the New Jersey State Department of Education officially banned the expulsion of preschoolers, and the North Dakota State Data Center initiated research on administrative practices within child care settings that may be contributing to high disenrollment (Dakota, Care & Design, 2008; State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2007). State organizations in Missouri, Michigan, Colorado, Minnesota, the District of Columbia, Connecticut, Illinois and others then began shedding light on and exploring interventions for the preschool expulsion occurring in each of their own regions (Zigler, 2016). The Obama Administration, in 2014, unveiled a $250 million dollar "preschool development grant" to improve the quality and accessibility of ECE for the birth to five population in 2014, and in 2016 the federal government began mandating that states report on their preschool expulsion and suspension policies through an amendment to that grant (Zigler, 2016).

The Theory of Psychosocial Development. Clinician and anthropologist Erik Erikson created a unique model for human development that details the intricate relationship between an individual and the society (Erikson, 1963). Erikson's theory, widely known as the Theory of Psychosocial Development (TPD), posits that the social experiences humans engage in are integral components of personality formation, and that each individual moves through eight stages of development from birth until old age (Batra, 2013; Erikson, 1963; Widick, Parker & Knefelcamp, 1978). Erikson suggests that each stage of development serves as a new constellation of experiences that stem from the interactions between a human's cognition, physiological and emotional urges, and social influences, which can either positively or negatively influence that human's ability

to function healthily and overcome conflict in the following stage. Therefore, TPD appropriately frames the problem of preschool expulsion, in that it sheds light on how early childhood experiences are influential in determining that child's trajectory later in life.

According to TPD, if a human experiences mastery and success when faced with conflict during a particular developmental stage, they will emerge from that stage with psychological strength and a resilient sense of self (Erikson, 1963). In contrast, if a human is unable to overcome the distress that accompanies conflict at a particular stage, he/she will emerge with psychological weakness and an inadequate sense of self (Erikson, 1963; Batra, 2013). The three initial stages of Erikson's psychosocial development pertain specifically to young children, and reveal the true power of early experiences in shaping a child's future. As such, adverse early childhood experiences- and specifically preschool expulsion- have the innate power of creating a rippling effect on a child's ability to thrive in their future across social, emotional, and academic contexts. The National Association for the Education of Young Children submitted a joint statement signed by over 30 national organizations that supports this very notion:

> Expulsions and suspensions in early childhood education both threaten the development of these positive relationships and are a result of the lack of positive relationships between educators, families and children. Expelling preschoolers is not an intervention. Rather, it disrupts the learning process, pushing a child out the door of one early care and education program, only for him or her to be enrolled somewhere else, continuing a negative cycle of revolving doors that

increases inequality and hides the child and family from access to meaningful

supports.

The negative cycle of revolving doors that children who are expelled from preschool so often experience reflects the distress that Erikson suggests results in a child's inadequate sense of self (1963). Unfortunately, if interventions are not tailored to address this problem early on, the outcomes for the child, the family and society as a whole are negative (Gilliam, 2005).

ECE teachers. Colluding in the pervasive issue of expulsion in ECE programs is the fact that ECE teachers have very minimal training and are, in most states, only required to have a high school diploma in order to be a teacher (Bueno, Darling-Hammond & Gonzales, 2010). As such, the average ECE teacher salary across the nation in 2015 was $20,300 for an individual working in a childcare, which is "less than mail order clerks, tree trimmers and pest control workers…hairdressers and janitors…most early childhood educators earn so little that they qualify for public benefits, including for the very programs they teach targeting low-income families." (US Department of Labor, 2015). These startling numbers and facts about ECE teachers align with the nation's need to shed light on the inequity that exists in education as a *whole* prior to Kindergarten, as research has extensively revealed that the professional qualifications of teachers are closely related to the overall quality of early learning programs (Bueno, Darling-Hammond & Gonzales, 2010). This information, coupled with the statistics that suggest expulsion is considered less often by high quality programs (Gilliam, 2005), might suggest that an increase in ECE teacher training is a critical factor associated with children's successes throughout their lives.

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Training on parent-teacher collaboration, specifically, is well documented in the literature as something correlated with positive outcomes for children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). However, much of the global literature (Aich, 2011; Epstein, 2013; Evans, 2013; Hornby & Witte, 2010) suggests that teachers are "poorly prepared for the communication aspect of their professional work, especially regarding interactions with parents" (Gartmeier, Gebhardt, & Dotger, 2016, p. 207). Even more unfortunate is the fact that those teachers mentioned above were all Bachelor level teacher candidates, which already sets them apart from their less educated counterparts that make up the majority of teachers in ECE programs across the nation (US Department of Labor, 2015). Luckily, the nation has shed light on intervention model that has been evaluated and deemed effective in increasing teacher competencies – and reducing expulsion- regardless of teacher education level: early childhood mental health consultation.

Early childhood mental health consultation. Nationally, research on how to best address the problem preschool expulsion has focused specifically on the early childhood mental health consultation model (ECMHC), and has deemed that ECE teachers who work with a mental health consultant in their ECE programs have greater self-efficacy, improved teacher-child relationships, decreased negative attributions of individual children, and increased capacity to engage with parents after learning key infant mental health competencies through consultation (Gilliam, 2007; Shivers, 2015). ECMHC is defined as "a preventative intervention that places ECMH consultants in early childhood settings to build social-emotional competence in programs and classrooms…partner with families to address a child's individual needs…and/or provide

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information, training, and resources to all families." (ZERO TO THREE, 2016, p. 2).

Duran et al. (2009), in their seminal research report titled *What Works: A Study of Effective Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Programs*, found that participation in ECMHC was linked to positive outcomes for *children, staff, families and programs* alike, including decreases in challenging behaviors, reductions in teacher stress levels, reductions in staff turnover, increases in families' access to mental health services, and decreases in preschool expulsions. Although the results and findings on ECMHC in recent years have been promising, Duran et al. suggest that remaining research questions must be answered in order for consultation to become more research based and effective, including two questions that inform this research project: (a) what are the best service models? and (b) what types of activities are most important for the consultant to provide in order to support the prevention of expulsion?

Local Context

Preschool expulsion rates in the state wherein the researcher works fall closely to the national mean, averaging expulsion of 4.79 out of every 1000 children enrolled in ECE programs in recent years (Gilliam, 2007). Although falling within the average range for preschool expulsions across the country is not worst-case-scenario, only 7% of the state's four-year-olds were enrolled in a prekindergarten program in 2014- only a 3% increase from 2013- which leaves the state falling significantly under the national average of 29% of four-year- olds engaging in an ECE program (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014). Teacher-child ratios in this state's preschool classrooms are higher than other states, which, according to prior research, is a predictor for expulsion (US Department of Education, 2014). Unfortunately, the state "squeezes funding of

preschool programs into district budgets", rather than allowing state money to fund the programs directly (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014).

There are several variables that influence the problem of preschool expulsion that should continue to be explored through future research. Specifically, more exploration is needed regarding the factors that contribute to ECE programs' decision-making processes regarding expulsions, as Gilliam and Reyes (2016) revealed that emerging evidence suggests ECE teachers and administrators consider a *variety* of aspects when considering the decision to expel or suspend. Further, ECE teachers hold a *critical role* in determining the measures taken when a child is at-risk for expulsion, which calls for teacher factors such as education level, knowledge of child development, amount of training, understanding of trauma, etc., to be examined as well. Although several studies have examined teacher factors in K-12 literature (Ashton, 1984; Soodak & Potel, 1996), very little research has been conducted among teachers in ECE settings. A central motivation for this action research study was to explore a particular *teacher factor* that could influence a teacher's decision to either suspend or expel a child in an ECE setting: their experiences in building relationships and communicating with families.

Role of the Researcher within Local Context

In a manner similar to other states that are focused on reducing expulsion rates in ECE programs, the western state in which the researcher works subsequently adopted the early childhood mental health consultation model, and gained funding for the program through a state initiative (Shivers, 2015). Through this initiative, early childhood mental health consultants in this particular state serve up to ten ECE sites within their particular region, and provide multi-level intervention services to teachers and directors in ECE

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programs throughout the state (Shivers, 2015). The focus of consultation work is commonly centered on enhancing social/emotional capacity among teachers and directors in early childhood education settings, so that they are best able to support children and their development as they enter the school system.

The researcher of this action research study previously served as an early childhood mental health consultant, and was employed by a large non-profit agency that is dedicated to supporting young children and their wellness ages birth through five. The researcher typically maintained a caseload of ten ECE programs that each experience unique challenges; the sites ranged from being corporate centers to faith-based schools to privately owned programs. It is within this situated context that the researcher was exposed to the problem of practice of preschool expulsion and, consequently, the potential impact of the teacher-caregiver relationship on the implementation of these punitive measures.

The early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) model within this state has a two-fold mission: (a) to support ECE programs in increasing their ability to promote social and emotional wellbeing in young children, and (b) to support ECE teachers and providers in their aptitude to support young children that may have mental health needs and challenging behaviors, which are most often the children that are prone to expulsion (Shivers, 2015). In order to fulfill this mission as a consultant, the researcher engaged in three levels of consultation with the ECE programs: programmatic, classroom-focused, and child-focused. In doing both programmatic and child-focused consultation, which involves working with the administrators of the particular program on enhancing the overall structure, policies and outcomes for children at the site, the

researcher identified that the majority of the ECE programs on her caseload all struggle,

to some degree, in knowing how to support children that exhibit challenging behaviors.

In attempts to support the programs in preserving the child's placement at their site rather

than deciding to expel at-risk children, the researcher attempted to support the ECE

context in several ways, such as assisting teachers in their knowledge of child

development, enhancing co-teacher relationships via discussions on communication

strategies, creating larger capacity in directors to have empathy for their teaching staff,

etc. However, in doing this work, the researcher was exposed to the fact that ECE

programs place significant value on a particular variable when it comes to their final

decision about the child's placement: the relationship that exists between the school and

the family, and more specifically, the teacher and the caregiver.

The Teacher-Caregiver Relationship Factor/Problem of Practice

Early childhood teachers that engage in the consultation process gain ample

knowledge and capacity to support young children in their ECE programs, yet often times

have no awareness as to the caregiving practices of the caregivers or experiences that

those children have once they leave for home at the end of the day. Without a meaningful

relationship with a child's caregivers, teachers often begin to feel incompetent, uncertain

and defensive when the young children in their classroom continue to exhibit challenging

behaviors, even though they have shifted her teaching practice; those feelings, in turn,

often times result in teachers excluding the challenging children from their natural

learning environment rather than attempting to support them further (Gilliam et al.,

2016). Similarly, caregivers often enter relationships with teachers on the defense,

without empathy, as so often conversations with a child's teacher are only required

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because of a *problem* in the classroom (Gilliam et al., 2016). As a result of this complicated dance between caregiver and teacher, ECE teachers often resort to avoiding conversations with caregivers, feeling helpless in terms of knowing how to best support the child in the classroom which, in turn, can lead to more punitive decision-making on behalf of the ECE program in terms of the placement of the child at the site.

The researcher has anecdotally experienced the above-mentioned challenge that ECE programs face consistently throughout her work as a consultant, however more research is needed to reveal ECE teacher experiences surrounding these relationships in the academic arena. Further, because little is known about these experiences, there is also room for literature on how culture and empathy might influence teacher experiences in communicating with caregivers. When teachers' relationships with families are tainted by defensiveness, anger and blaming, expulsion of an at-risk child is more often than not the culminating result. Therefore, it is essential that both researchers and practitioners know how to best support ECE teachers when it comes to engaging in these relationships, in order to mitigate the pervasive issue of preschool expulsion.

Initial Cycles of Research

The rippling effect that preschool expulsion and exclusionary practices have on a child's future are detrimental to society- research has shown that children who are expelled from preschool are as much as ten times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). There are several variables that influence the problem of preschool expulsion that should continue to be explored through future research. Specifically, more

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exploration is needed regarding the factors that contribute to early childhood education (ECE) programs' decision-making processes surrounding utilization of these penal measures when it comes to young children with behavioral challenges. One variable in particular is of seminal interest to the researcher of this study, as it has been evident in her work that this factor heavily influences decisions to expel or exclude children: a caregiver's involvement in the problem-solving process. Two initial, informal cycles of research were conducted to narrow the researcher's focus on the teacher and caregiver relationship, create research questions that aligned with the aim of the study, and inform the Relational Cultural Communication intervention tailored to increase awareness among teachers that participated.

The initial phase of action research- known as cycle 0- that the researcher conducted sought to qualitatively examine ECE stakeholder perspectives on two variables: preschool expulsion or exclusionary practices and family school partnerships in ECE programs. Specifically, the researcher conducted semis-structured interviews with three participants, each of whom maintain separate roles in the realm of ECE, in hopes of answering the following research question:

1. What are the perceptions of stakeholders that interact with/work within ECE programs on family-school partnerships and their potential impact on expulsion and exclusionary practices?

The researcher personally analyzed the interview data using a coding process in order to identify unifying themes across the three participants' transcriptions. The researcher utilized a data-driven coding process outlined by DuCuir-Gunby, Marshall and McCulloch (2011), as this particular process allowed for the researcher to classify smaller

units of data based on level of meaning (information that shares meaning with other pieces of information in the transcripts). Following the coding process, the researcher further refined important components of the transcripts into themes, which surfaced in correlation to the research questions driving the study.

Three central themes emerged in the data analysis process. First, the stakeholders all shared beliefs that expulsion and exclusionary practices are warranted in ECE programs when it came to safety concerns in the classroom. The second theme that arose from the analysis suggested that all three participants felt family school collaboration is necessary for children to be successful in ECE programs. The final theme that arose from this initial phase of research revealed that participants felt that time is a central barrier to creating family school partnerships in ECE programs. The three themes provided insight to the researcher in terms of stakeholder beliefs as well as barriers to successfully implementing family school partnerships in ECE programs. The themes also suggested that participants in different roles within the ECE system connect family school partnerships with child success and that those partnerships only mitigate- not exacerbate- the possibility of expulsion.

The researcher also learned in this initial cycle of action research that the terminology "family school partnership" was not utilized by the participants in their interviews, which resulted in the researcher shifting to new terminology in subsequent cycles. Further, the researcher utilized the information on time as a barrier to inform future cycles of research, specifically in terms of how long trainings are, how much the researcher is asking of participants, etc. This information served as a foundation for the next cycle of research.

The next phase of research- known as cycle 1- sought to examine the influence of a small-scale intervention on ECE teacher perceptions of three constructs within the context of teacher and caregiver relationships. The researcher utilized a concurrent mixed-method design to triangulate data aimed at answering the following three research questions:

1. How and to what extent does participation in a FSP training intervention affect early childhood teacher **attitudes** of the influence of FSPs on a child's success? (mixed method)

2. How and to what extent does participation in a FSP training intervention influence early childhood teacher perceptions of their own **self-efficacy** in engaging with families in ECE programs? (mixed method)

3. How and to what extent does participation in a FSP training intervention influence early childhood teachers' **intentionality** of engaging with families in ECE programs? (mixed method)

The researcher collected pre- and post-intervention survey data from three participants, as well as conducted semi-structured interviews post-intervention to sufficiently answer the research questions. The researcher utilized GoogleForms, SPSS, and HyperResearch programs to collect and analyze data over the course of a three-month period, and utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method to identify themes as they emerged in the interview data.

Analysis of the survey data from this cycle of research revealed that (although not significantly due to low number of participants): (a) teacher attitudes were positive towards teacher caregiver relationships, regardless of the intervention, (b) teacher

perceptions of their own self- efficacy increased post-intervention, and (c) teacher intentionality to engage in relationships with caregivers increased post-intervention. Qualitative analysis revealed that the small-scale intervention, on a thematic level, left participants feeling that the intervention (a) served as a reminder of the importance of caregiver relationships, (b) increased teacher knowledge of teacher caregiver relationships, (c) did not influence teacher perceptions that teacher caregiver relationships are positive, and (d) increased teacher perceptions of their own self-efficacy in participating in those relationships with caregivers. These outcomes suggest that some of the data from both methods were complementary and others were not. Specifically, both analyses revealed that teachers have positive attitudes towards teacher caregiver relationships, as well as have the perceptions that their efficacy increased after participation in the intervention. However, intentionality, the third construct, revealed contradictory evidence in the mixed method design, which suggests that further evaluation of the construct is needed for future research.

Although the two cycles of research increased the researcher's understanding of some perspectives of ECE stakeholders and teachers, they also revealed that much more must to be understood surrounding ECE teacher experiences as they engage in these relationships with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion. The researcher recognized throughout this iterative process that the body of research on ECE needs a thick description of these teacher experiences in order to even begin to create interventions tailored to support their ability to engage with caregivers whose children are at-risk. The researcher, combining her knowledge of relationships as a mental health

clinician and consultant with her desire to increase teacher awareness of their

relationships with caregivers, arrived at the following action research proposal.

Purpose of Research

 The purpose of this action research study is two-fold. First, the researcher would

like to gather information surrounding ECE teachers' experiences as they communicate

with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion, specifically surrounding their

perceptions on the roles that both empathy and culture play in these relationships.

Second, the researcher would like to better understand ECE teacher experiences as they

participate in a Relational-Cultural Communication Training (RCCT), designed to help

ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their

communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, in terms of how it

might influence teacher attitudes towards building relationships with families. Due to the

positive relationship that has been revealed across the literature between a child's success

and collaboration among schools and families (Epstein & Connors, 1992), the researcher

hypothesizes that (a) gaining a comprehensive understanding of ECE teacher experiences

as they communicate with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion and (b)

identifying how a RCCT intervention will enhance teacher attitudes towards

communicating with those caregivers will add to the literature on ECE, increase teacher

use of both empathy and cultural sensitivity while communicating, and decrease the use

of expulsion as a solution to challenging behavior. The following research questions

guide the current study:

1. How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that **culture** plays in their

    communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

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2. How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that **empathy** plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

3. How and to what extent does participation in a Relational Cultural Communication training (RCCT), designed to help ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, influence teacher attitudes towards building relationships with families?

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation (a) situate the researcher's project in the context of theory and existing literature, (b) outline the research design and method the researcher will utilize to conduct her study, (c) discuss findings, and (d) critically examine the outcomes of the study in terms of how the information can inform future research. Specifically, chapter two discusses the theoretical perspectives that guide the project and reviews literature on ECE, relationships among families and schools, and self-efficacy of teachers. Next, chapter three outlines the research design, setting, participants, role of the researcher, data collection procedure, data analysis procedure and timeline associated with the conduction of this research study. Chapter four presents the findings that resulted from both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data sources utilized in this study. Finally, chapter five summarizes the findings that resulted from the analyses in terms of how the data can shape current practices in ECE, inform upcoming research on similar topics, and serve as a prototype that reveals both the effective components of this research study as well as the shortcomings that should be considered in replicating or expanding upon this work in the future.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH GUIDING THE PROJECT

"Prison means…you are not here with us… expulsion means the same." (W. Gilliam, personal communication, December 2017).

Researchers in the fields of education and mental health have shed considerable light on the impact of negative childhood experiences on a young child's development and subsequent outcomes (Gilliam, 2016; Shivers, 2015). Specifically, the literature on ECE has revealed that several variables in the school setting- i.e. teacher training/education, teacher stress levels, number of children in the classroom living in poverty, teacher-child ratios, etc. - can influence the social and emotional development and wellbeing of young children, both positively and negatively (Gilliam, 2008). This list, however, leaves much to be desired by way of further research, as Gilliam (2008) shared in his brief on preschool policy that "further research should focus on (a) family and community factors associated with risk for expulsion, (b) effective method s for fostering effective preschool –home collaborations…" (p. 8). The need for further research on the above-mentioned relationships has served as a catalyst for the current action research study.

The following section will review relevant theoretical frameworks and constructs that situate the current study and the need for intervention. Relevant literature will be examined within each framework and for each construct, justification for use of theoretical perspectives will be provided in terms of the current study, and implications will be discussed.

Theoretical Perspectives and Constructs

In order to adequately frame the purpose of this action research project and answer the research questions, the researcher developed ideas from two theoretical structures. The first provides support for the context and participants of the study, and the second provides a basis for the intervention within the context. The researcher will first discuss bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in order to highlight the existing literature that suggests collaboration between families and schools is vital for a child's overall success in the future. Following, the researcher will review the literature based on relational cultural theory (Baker Miller, 1976), as it serves as the framework that guides the intervention tailored to increase teacher awareness of the roles both empathy and culture play in the relationships they build with caregivers whose children are potentially at-risk for expulsion. Figure 1 displays a visual framework of the two theories and how they cohesively establish the foundation of this project.

Figure 1. *Overarching framework for project*
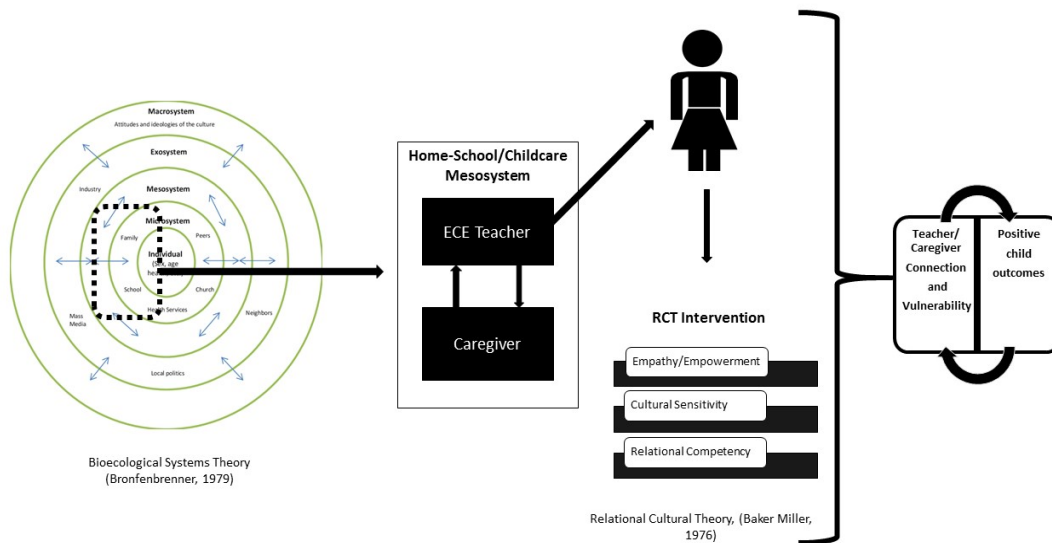
Bioecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner, in his 1979 key publication *The Ecology of Human Development*, introduced a framework for human development that suggests the entire ecological system in which human growth occurs *must* be examined in order to fully understand the developing child/person. The theory, heavily influenced by the theorist's early collaboration with psychologist Lev Vygotsky, suggests that there are several intersecting systems that impact the functioning of a developing human: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). These systems, according to the theory, interact with the inherent qualities of young children and influence how those children grow and develop. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stressed the essential need for researchers and practitioners to examine children and their outcomes from the lens of the several ecological systems in which they exist.

Since its creation in 1979, ecological systems theory has evolved to consider the impact of and place more importance on the role of both the individual and proximal processes that fuel human development, which led to the rebranding of the theory as Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) in 1980 (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This bioecological system theoretical framework has been foundational in providing a structure for research over the years across several domains, from economics, to politics, to public health, and, of course, to child development (Kamenopoulou, 2016). In regard to this action research project, BST functions as the framework that speaks to the need for improved teacher and caregiver relationships as they pertain to the success of young children in ECE programs.

BST posits that child experiences are dependent on the mutual accommodation between a developing human being and the ever-changing properties of the environments in which that human exists; specifically, BST suggests that the quality of *relationships* among these environments and systems have incredible impact on human developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rose & Tudge, 2013). Literature on teacher-caregiver relationships and ECE primarily focuses on the mesosystemic level of the ecological system in which a child develops, which Rose and Tudge (2013) explain as the level that accounts for the relational/interactional component of two microsystems (home and school, for example). Constructs of BST will be discussed in more detail, particularly in terms of their implications when it comes to the outcomes of a young child.

Microsystem. The microsystem, according to BST, is the most immediate layer of the nested systems in which a child evolves, and encompasses the relationships and interactions that a child has with their closest surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environments that most often characterize this particular level of BST are a child's family system, a child's school or childcare system, a child's neighborhood, a child's faith community, etc. Because of the proximity of these systems to the developing child, BST postulates that the manner in which these small systems interact with the child has an indelible influence on how that child grows; specifically, the more nurturing and secure the environments and relationships are, the better the child will fare across all domains as they evolve (Rose & Tudge, 2013). Through this lens, it can be inferred that the family system and the school system are the two most critical contexts for child development. Prior literature on ECE, therefore, unsurprisingly places emphasis on the importance of

high-quality early childhood education for young children (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, 2008; Shivers, 2015; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Blatchford & Taggart, 2010).

Mesosystem. The prefix "meso" comes from the Greek "mesos" or "middle", which precisely describes this particular level of the nested system outlined in BST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem, the layer just secondary to the microsystem in terms of proximity to the developing child, is characterized by the interactions among the contexts within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Specifically, the mesosystem situates the relationship that exists between a child's caregivers and their early childhood educators, which is the relationship of focus in this action research project.

The nature of the relationship between a child's family system and their school system, starting at infancy, shapes the trajectory of a child in terms of their functioning across all developmental domains (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For example, if the relationship between the family system and the school system is characterized by a mutual endeavor involving caregivers and early childhood educators- through mediums such as conferences, day-to-day conversations, daily reports and events that foster shared-meaning- the child will be more successful developmentally. Conversely, if the relationship between caregivers and early childhood educators is colored by disagreement, tension and emotional instability, the child will, most likely, have more challenges in terms of their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The relational dance between caregiver and educator, which is situated in a child's mesosystem, is the variable that this action research study hopes to enhance.

Proximal Processes. BST's evolution across time has resulted in the theory expanding to consider a construct that Bronfenbrenner has coined as proximal processes,

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which he deems are the "engines of development" (Rose & Tudge, 2013, p. 252).

Proximal processes are characterized by the multifaceted reciprocity of interactions between an evolving human and the people, objects and symbols in their adjacent environments that gradually change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). For example, a proximal process for an infant would be his/her interaction with the bottle their caregiver is feeding them from for the first time; another example would be a toddler's first interaction with a teacher when they fall on the playground on their first day of childcare. Bronfenbrenner suggests that, in order for proximal processes to be efficient in supporting healthy development, they must occur *regularly and consistently over long periods of time* (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). As such, proximal processes can result in one of two outcomes in humans: they can have an innate power to form competency and self-efficacy in a young child, or they can cause dysfunction. BST posits that the nature of proximal processes is dependent on several variables, and suggests that these interactions are correlated with positive outcomes most often when environments are *stable and advantageous*. It is, therefore, critical that the proximal processes occurring both within the family system and the ECE system- as well as between the systems- are effective in supporting young children thrive.

BST and the three central constructs outlined above- the microsystem, the mesosystem and proximal processes- provide a foundation that suggests the need for and enhancement of teacher and caregiver relationships in ECE programs. It is the researcher's hypothesis that increasing teachers' abilities to interact and communicate with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion will not only support best

practices in ECE programs, but also lessen exclusionary practices for young children ages 0-5.

Bioecological Systems Theory in Context

Much of the literature focused on ECE is grounded in BST; specifically, research on teacher competencies, parent-teacher relationships, child behavior, social/emotional development and adverse experiences in childhood has been situated within this multisystemic lens (Kamenopoulu, 2016). The studies outlined below provide support for the use of BST in this action research project.

Yan and Ansari (2017) conducted a nonexperimental quantitative research study in hopes of identifying/portraying relationships between intrusive caregiving (caregiving practices that are overwhelming to children such as yelling) of both parents and early childhood educators and externalizing behaviors (behaviors that are forceful in nature and are able to be witnessed such as kicking) in young children, ages 54 months to ten years. The researchers framed their study utilizing two theoretical models that are often seen in early childhood education literature, due to their perspectives on human development: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, and Lerner's developmental systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In reviewing prior literature on intrusive caregiving and externalizing behaviors- using a systemic lens formed by the two frameworks mentioned above- the researchers predicted that (a) intrusive caregiving increases externalizing behaviors in children, (b) externalizing behaviors in children increases intrusive caregiving, and that (c) the relationships would vary as a function of gender and race/ethnicity (Yan & Ansari, 2017). The researchers' randomly sampled 1364 mothers and children (comparable numbers of males/females and 80% Caucasian)

involved in the larger longitudinal NICHD Study of Early Childcare, and included data from the study in the children's preschool year, first grade year, and third grade year. Data was collected through video observations of interactions between parents and children and quantified in terms of the quality of the interactions through a coding process. For teacher interactions, the Observational Ratings of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE) and the Classroom Observation System (COS) were utilized as means of data collection. Externalizing behaviors were gauged utilizing the Child Behavior Checklist and the Teacher Report Form, both of which have extensive validity and reliability in the literature.

Using chi square analysis, the researchers found that (a) both parent and teacher intrusiveness were positively correlated to externalizing behaviors in children, (b) children's externalizing behaviors predicted an increase in intrusive caregiving, and that (c) teacher intrusiveness significantly predicted externalizing behaviors in the later years in non-white children in comparison to white children (Yan & Ansari, 2017). The results suggest further investigation is needed into what is driving the intrusive caregiving and how this might be ameliorated, on the side of the teacher and the caregiver alike, particularly based on BST constructs and tenets. Albeit the researchers' ability to successfully add to a gap in the literature, the study looked only at high functioning children and did not consider exploring the influence of caregiving on lower functioning children, who are most often influenced by preschool exclusionary practices.

Similar to Yan and Ansari (2017), Lang, Tolbert, Schoppe-Sullivan & Bonomi (2015) utilized BST to structure their study, however their research focused particularly on parent-teacher relationships (PTR). Lang et al. (2015) sought to determine the

effectiveness of applying a co-parenting framework to PTR in ECE programs, specifically to identify significant dimensions of the mesosystemic relationship that are needed to support improved childhood outcomes in young, at-risk children. The researchers coined this relationship between a parent and an ECE teacher as a "cocaring relationship". The researchers conducted and audio-recorded comprehensive semi-structured interviews that lasted 10-20 minutes in length with the study participants. The interviews were transcribed initially by research assistants and coded to identify themes through use of computer software, and were then comprehensively evaluated and reviewed by the researchers of the study biweekly over a span of four months for *inductive* purposes (Lang et al., 2015). The researchers also utilized the co-parenting framework to shape their *deductive* analysis and uncover themes in the following three cocaring domains which, per prior research, are linked to positive childhood outcomes: communication, support versus undermining, and childrearing agreement versus disagreement. Intervention methods were not utilized in this study; however, the results of this study provide a framework for a cocaring intervention should one be needed in the future.

Lang et al. (2015) uncovered that both parents and teachers in their sample (a) sought open communication and reciprocity in delivering information to each other, (b) felt supported rather than under-minded, and (c) felt they tended to agree rather than disagree in terms of child-rearing practices. The results of this study suggested that positive cocaring relationships *can* exist within infant/toddler classrooms that cater to low-income, non-immigrant families, and that teachers and parents utilize several

strategies within a co-parenting framework to strengthen their relationships as a cocaring team.

In order combat the problem of expulsion and exclusion in ECE programs, families and ECE educators must collaborate in the problem-solving process when it comes to supporting children that have behavioral, social and emotional challenges. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory provides a sound contextual framework that suggests the need for healthy, frequent and meaningful interactions among the microsystems in which a child develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework allows the researcher to hypothesize that, if caregivers and ECE teachers collaborate in this positive manner when it comes to problem solving, children will be more successful in their overall development. BST also supports the prediction that an intervention surrounding these partnerships will lead to less use of exclusionary practices. It does not, however, speak to exactly *how* the intervention supports these relationships, or what components of the intervention are intended to shift teacher capacity to engage with families; relational cultural theory, therefore, serves as the second element of the overarching framework for this proposal.

BST serves as the contextual framework for this study, in that it situates the need for teacher caregiver relationships, and RCT serves as the operational framework, in that its constructs serve as the basis of the training intervention aimed at improving those relationships. Specifically, RCT is a vital framework for the change process that is integral to this action research project, as it outlines competencies that increase an individual's ability to engage with families. BST and RCT, therefore, complement each

other as the foundation for teacher change in ECE programs. The next section discusses RCT in depth.

Relational Cultural Theory

Jean Baker Miller, a clinical psychiatrist and social activist, wrote the seminal piece *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), which broke ground in the world of psychological theories as it spoke to the sheer power that context, sociopolitical forces and relationships had on women's lives. Her seminal work on the experiences of women in their contexts expanded in 1978 as she joined forces with several other practitioners and, together, they formed what is now called relational cultural theory (Jordan, 2008). Initially a feminist theory, relational cultural theory (RCT) has since "expanded to incorporate a more explicitly multicultural and social justice perspective" (Frey, 2013, p. 179), and has served as a theoretical framework that supports the innate need that individuals have for relationships and, more specifically, growth fostering relationships (Frey, 2013). RCT, therefore, has emerged in the literature as an alternative to typical theories of human development, as it specifically considers the relational experiences of women and other culturally marginalized groups of individuals and speaks to the importance of both empathy and culture when it comes to relationship building (Comstock et al., 2008).

The central notion of RCT is rooted in the concept of connection; specifically, the theory posits that healthy relationships and senses of self are characterized by mutual empathy and empowerment, two factors that lead to (a) increased zest (vitality), (b) increased ability to take action, (c) increased clarity, and an (d) increased sense of worth in individuals who partake in those relationships (Jordan & Hartling, 2010). More

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specifically, RCT proposes that differentiation and growth develop from meaningful and mutual connections with others (Frey, 2013), and that these relationships lead to the increase of empathy, authenticity, empowerment and self-expression necessary for individuals to effectively communicate with each other. On the contrary, if these characteristics are absent, disconnection is the relational outcome (Frey, 2014). Disconnection, relational cultural theorists warn (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997), results in a "pervasive lack of interpersonal connection and sense of isolation leading to distress," (Frey, 2013, p. 178), which leads to growth-inhibition and relational conflict that can persist and habitually rupture relationships.

RCT sheds considerable light on the influence that disconnection can have on relationships, and in particular relationships that have a power differential, such as the relationship between a clinician and a client (Jordan & Hartling, 2010). Similarly, this framework supports the positionality differential between a teacher and a caregiver, which is of central focus of this dissertation. The theory suggests that disconnection is an inevitable component of relationships, and that it can either (a) lead to an increase in relational competence of an individual should the relationship be empathic in nature, or it can (b) lead an individual to rely on withdrawing or avoidant strategies aimed at achieving self-preservation (Jordan & Hartling, 2010). Specifically, Jordan and Hartling (2010) describe the duality that can result from disconnection:

> When, in response to a disconnection, the injured (especially the less powerful) person is able to represent her feelings and the other person is able to respond empathically, experiences of disconnection can lead to a strengthened relationship and an increased sense of relational competence, i.e., being able to effect change

and feeling effective in connections. However, when the injured or less powerful

person is unable to represent herself or her feelings in a relationship, or when she

receives a response of indifference, additional injury, or denial of her experience,

she will begin to keep aspects of herself out of relationship in order to keep the

relationship. In RCT, this is referred to as the central relational paradox. In these

situations, the individual will use a variety of strategies—known as strategies of

disconnection or survival—to twist herself to fit into the relationships available,

becoming less and less authentic. (p. 2).

The complexity that accompanies an individual's ability to achieve relational competence

is in the context of disconnection colors the relationships between teachers and

caregivers, as interactions between the two are often associated with high stakes: the

future of a young child. As a result, disconnection, or self-preservation on behalf of both

parties, is often the outcome in these sensitive relationships.

Several relational cultural theorists have expanded the concepts mentioned above

to include consideration of an individual's ability to relate with others as a function the

social practices of stratification and categorization based on race, gender, class, etc.

(Jordan & Hartling, 2010; Walker, 1999, 2001; Walker & Miller, 2001). In other words,

RCT posits that there is a cultural context that situates relationships, which must be

examined and considered when it comes to the self-reflection necessary to achieve

meaningful connection with others (Frey, 2013). More specifically, RCT supports the

multicultural/social justice paradigm by placing emphasis on the fact that institutionalized

forms of oppression that exist at the societal level are often experienced in the context of

interpersonal relationships, and that neglecting to consider the influence of culture on

relationships reinforces the silence that often accompanies the subject (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT, as a result, serves as a framework that promotes relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies among those that examine their own cultural-based disconnection factors in hopes to improve relationships, and those are the very competencies that the researcher hopes to enhance through her intervention.

The following section discusses central tenets of RCT that are meaningful to the framing of this dissertation. First, the researcher will discuss the concept of mutual empathy. Next, the researcher will discuss the multicultural and social justice component of the framework. Following those definitions, a review of literature will be provided that supports use of RCT in fostering relational competence among teachers in ECE.

Mutual empathy. Expanding upon Carl Roger's relational concept of empathy, from his 1975 seminal article titled *Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being*, relational cultural theorists suggest that the process of empathy is *reciprocal* in nature rather than one-way, leading to the rebranding of the term to mutual empathy (Comstock et al., 2008). Mutual empathy, according to RCT, is co-created between the two individuals involved- clinician and client, teacher and parent, etc. - and requires each individual involved in the relationship to be vulnerable, attuned, responsive, and open to change. According to Jordan (1985), mutual empathy is defined as

> ...the affective-cognitive experience of understanding another person...[It] carries with it some notion of motivation to understand another's meaning system from his/her frame of reference and ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of the other (p. 2).

RCT theorists warn that mutual empathy is not a relational courtesy, but rather a

sophisticated skill, and serves as an empathic bridge on which two individuals can meet

and achieve change without using power tactics or inducing humiliation or shame

(Hartling & Miller, 2004). The vulnerability that accompanies the process of mutual

empathy provides the space for teachers to be more culturally competent as well, as it

creates opportunities for deeper understanding of another's worldview: the caregiver's

(Comstock et al., 2008). If mutual empathy is successfully achieved, a deeper knowledge

of each individual's experience is clarified, which is fundamental in creating meaningful

change. Mutual empowerment, as a result, arises from mutual empathy (Hartling &

Miller, 2004).

Mutual Empowerment. Similar to mutual empathy, the concept of mutual

empowerment is also coined by RCT theorists (Baker Miller & Stiver, 1997). However,

mutual empowerment expands upon the concept of mutual empathy in that it suggests the

two individuals both feel they have *influence* on the relationship, specifically in terms of

moving it into a healthy direction rather than towards disempowerment, disconnection,

and humiliation (Baker Miller & Stiver, 1997). If teachers and caregivers both feel

empowered in their interactions with each other, they are more likely to be "open to

possibilities" rather than feeling "immobilized, confused, and isolated". (Hartling &

Miller, 2004, p. 2), which will ultimately enhance their efforts to support the young

children in their care who are at risk for expulsion.

Multicultural and social justice perspective. RCT, in recent years, has evolved

from its initial framework focused specifically on the experiences of women to include

and examine the influence that oppression, marginalization and social stratification have

on all persons, regardless of sex (Comstock et al., 2008). Specifically, RCT sheds light on how sociocultural factors serve as grave variables that foster disconnection among people which, in turn, further exacerbates the inequities that exist between those who marginalized and those who are not (Comstock et al., 2008). Relational disconnections, according to Comstock et al. (2008), occur due to "power differentials, gender role socialization, racism, cultural oppression, health disparities, heterosexism, and other social injustices" (p. 282), and failing to acknowledge these contextual and historical influences while engaging in a relationship with another can lead to an immense amount of shame, inferiority, resentment, etc. Along those lines, teachers failing to acknowledge these factors reinforce shame in caregivers, which increases the likelihood for disconnection when it comes to their children who are at risk for expulsion in ECE programs.

Although RCT found its beginning in the context of the marginalization of women, the theory is congruent with other critical perspectives in questioning the applicability of traditional theoretical frameworks as suitable for situating *all* human experience (Frey, 2013). The theory posits that individuals are unable to engage in connection with others- a concept the framework coins as an empathic failure- unless they are able to recognize the ways in which "power dynamics within [one's] culture" can affect an individual's wellbeing (Jordan, 2008, p. 3).

Albeit the central role that the concept of culture plays in RCT, the notion of an individual being culturally competent- which RCT suggests is necessary for connection- is not clearly defined in the framework; similarly, the concept of cultural competence has been notoriously difficult to operationalize across several frameworks that have

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attempted to give the phrase meaning (Jirwe, Gerrish & Emami, 2006). Jirwe, Gerrish and Emami (2006), in their analysis of the nine most cited frameworks that define cultural competency, found that four core components held consistency across the theories: (a) an awareness of diversity among humans, (b) an ability to care for individuals, (c) nonjudgmental openness for all individuals, and (d) enhancing cultural competence as a long-term continuous process. These concepts push us to consider how differences in sex, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and educational background, among other variables, might complicate the already delicate relationships between ECE teachers and caregivers. These power differentials, in turn, may exacerbate disconnection between parent and teacher, increasing disruption and instability in the mesosphere of the child, and contributing to the vicious cycle of disconnection and externalizing behavior.

Gilliam et al. (2016) revealed in their study on implicit bias that culture does play a role in how ECE teachers respond to children with challenging behaviors in classrooms. Their study was prompted by the research that has shown that African American little boys are disproportionately expelled (6 times more so) from ECE programs in comparison to their counterparts, and lack of literature on the causes of this discrepancy. The researchers utilized eye tracking software to examine where ECE teachers gazed mostly while observing a vignette with four children in an ECE classroom that did were not exhibiting any challenging behavior - one Caucasian girl, one Caucasian boy, one African American girl and one African American boy. The results revealed that the teachers spent most time observing the African American boy, even though none of the children were truly exhibiting challenging behavior- a finding that suggests that teachers anticipate the behaviors more so from African American young boys as a result of

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implicit bias on gender and race. The study's (2016) implications, outlined at the end of

the research brief, stated that

> In the course of teacher-family interactions, early educators may learn more about
>
> the struggles, and strengths, of the families they serve. However, it seems likely
>
> that teachers may benefit from increased training and ongoing guidance, perhaps
>
> through services such as early childhood mental health consultation, to understand
>
> how best to use this information, increase their empathic understanding of the
>
> child, and avoid feelings of hopelessness…Future work in this area should
>
> explore the potential protective effects of better home-preschool connections and
>
> early educators' emotional connectedness to the parents and families they serve
>
> and the impact this may have on preschool expulsions and suspensions (p. 15).

The critical role that culture plays in an individual's ability to emotionally connect with

another, as outlined in RCT, is therefore a central focus of this action research project and

of the relational cultural communication intervention designed for this study.

Relational Cultural Theory in Context

Much of the literature that supports the constructs and assumptions that compose

RCT exists within domains of psychology and mental health, however the relational

concepts effectively translate across contexts (Frey, 2013). The following section

examines existing literature that utilized RCT as a framework to examine and improve

relationships, and suggests that the notions outlined in RCT effectively influence

individuals in their ability to relate to each other, which is the ultimate purpose of this

action research study.

Several scholars have examined RCT and its assumptions (Frey, 2013). Liang, Tracy, Taylor and Williams (2002) conducted a study exploring the assumption that relational quality is more important than structural components of relationships among college women receiving mentorship from another student. Two hundred ninety-six female undergraduates from a small liberal arts college in New England participated in the mixed method study and were asked to complete the validated Relational Health Index (RHI) questionnaire regarding their experiences with their mentor (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan & Miller, 2002). Data was collected and analyzed to determine the influence of the four components of healthy connection, as outlined by RCT (empathy, empowerment, engagement and authenticity) on mentor relationships in comparison to the structural components (e.g. frequency of contact, matching gender and ethnicity, etc.). The researchers found that the students felt structural components had little importance in comparison to the nature and quality of the relationship they had with their mentors. Further, the study found that the notions of mutual engagement, authenticity and empowerment were linked to positive developmental outcomes in the participants. These findings suggest that strengthening quality relational competency among mentors is more influential on success than structural components. This aligns with the researcher's intervention, in that building teacher competency when it comes to concepts such as empathy might be more influential than increasing the number of parent nights, for example.

Another study, specifically in the context of educational research, sought to examine the core concepts of RCT and their influence on sustaining relationships between educational researchers and the participants (Tricknor & Averett, 2017).

Tricknor and Averett (2017) utilized a qualitative research design and engaged preservice teachers in mutually empathic relationships throughout the data collection process to see if the tenets of RCT support their engagement with their participants. The researchers utilized participants from two prior studies that they each piloted- elementary education preservice candidates in their early 20s- and conducted semi-structured interviews regarding participant experiences in the data collection process. The qualitative analysis revealed several shifts from participants in comparison to previous qualitative research they had done in the past, based on the RCT concepts they implemented as the researchers. Specifically, the researchers found that (a) participant sharing was rich and generative, (b) participants were eager to come and share their experiences, (c) participants made additional contact with other participants and the researcher outside of scheduled meetings, (d) participants demonstrated increased confidence as novice teachers, and (e) RCT designed research infiltrated the research communities and teaching practices. Thus, RCT concepts served as a means to improve relationships between researchers and preservice teacher candidates, and enhanced the rich data the researchers intended to gather via a relational medium with their participants.

RCT has been utilized to situate several studies in the fields of mental health and psychology (Frey, 2013). Specifically, researchers have used RCT to frame research on clinicians treating individuals with eating disorders (Trepal, Boie & Kress, 2012), self-harming behaviors (Trepal, 2010), and young adolescents (Tucker, Smith-Adcock & Trepal, 2011). Further, Paris and Dubus (2005) designed a study using RCT as the framework to improve relationships between at-risk mothers and in-home technical assistance providers, and Paris, Gemborys, Kaufman and Whitehill (2007) expanded

upon that research and used RCT principles to shape professional development programs and supervision practices for those in-home supports. Finally, the field of neuroscience is beginning to add support to the influential power of interpersonal relationships that underscore the RCT framework, as scientists are highlighting the impact of relationships on the neural systems and the fact that "it is the power of being with others that shapes our brain" (Cozolino, 2006, p. 9).

RCT and its core tenets serve as a meaningful foundation for the improvement of relationships. The theory strongly supports the researcher's intervention that is aimed at enhancing ECE teacher's competency when it comes to engaging with families and caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion from their ECE programs.

Overarching Framework

The complex issue of preschool expulsion has a variety of possible causes and, in turn, a myriad of possible solutions. As outlined by the literature discussed above, the intervention created for this study, which is designed to increase teacher awareness of the roles that both empathy and culture play in their relationships with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion, can be framed effectively with the two theoretical paradigms discussed: bioecological systems theory and relational cultural theory (Baker-Miller, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The combination of concepts and assumptions from the two frameworks provides a sound foundation for the aims of this action research project. The subsequent chapter, in turn, will provide the methods and methodology utilized by the researcher to successfully implement the ideas outlined in the first two chapters.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

"The key to managing the difficult behaviors of children is to manage our own behavior as adults." – Rosemarie Allen, TED Talk

Recall from earlier chapters that early childhood experiences, which have been of central focus to several theorists and researchers dating back to Freud's seminal work on development, are deemed throughout the literature as the cornerstone and foundation for the rest of a child's life (Felitti et. al, 1998; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Because of the impact that early childhood development has on the trajectory of a child's life in later years, researchers and policy makers have shed considerable light on how to *increase* the potential for positive experiences and *decrease* the potential of adverse experiences to which young children are exposed. Of particular focus in current literature is the impact of preschool expulsion on future academic and social outcomes for children (Gilliam, 2005). In order to support the prevention of expulsion of young children in ECE programs, the researcher of this action research study sought to examine one of the critical factors that colors decision making among ECE programs when it comes to children at-risk: the relationship between teachers and caregivers (Epstein & Connors, 1992). The following research questions directed the researcher's efforts:

1. How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that **culture** plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

2. How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that **empathy** plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

3. How and to what extent does participation in a Relational Cultural Communication training (RCCT), designed to help ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, influence teacher attitudes towards building relationships with families?

The researcher hypothesized that ECE teacher perceptions of relationships with caregivers will initially be characterized by negativity and fear; the researcher also hypothesized that ECE teachers will have spent very little time reflecting on how culture and empathy each play a role in their interactions. The researcher further hypothesized that teacher attitudes towards engaging in these relationships with families, while considering the roles that culture and empathy play in these interactions, will have shifted in a positive direction after their participation in the intervention, indicating that the intervention was successful in revealing the benefits of such training.

The following section describes the components of both the method and methodology utilized by the researcher in conducting this action research study. Specifically, this section outlines the (a) research design, (b) setting, (c) participants and sampling, (d) the role of the researcher and (e) the intervention. Further, data collection procedures and a timeline of data collection are discussed.

Research Design

Action research is a methodological approach to systematic inquiry that seeks to recognize contextually-based problems of practice and, in turn, identify practical solutions for those problems (Koshy, 2005). Meyer (2000) posits that action research is a practical process of investigation that ultimately empowers practitioners to interact with

their findings and, ultimately, achieve change within their own contexts through shifts in practices. At its core, the iterative process of action research allows researcher-practitioners to "learn through *action* that then leads on to personal or professional development." (Koshy, 2005, p. 4). Action research, therefore, served as a sound medium of inquiry for the researcher of this study, as she sought to both inform and influence the practices of teachers in ECE programs as they engage in relationships with caregivers and families. The action research approach allowed the researcher to observe, hypothesize, and gather information within the natural ECE context in which the participants work, which ultimately allowed for richer understanding of both the problem at hand and the need for a meaningful, tangible solution.

Pragmatist paradigm. There are several opposing paradigms in both past and current literature that situate the innate process of individuals obtaining knowledge (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2014). Pragmatism is the philosophical foundation most closely aligned with mixed-method inquiry, as it suggests that "what has practical and functional value is ultimately important and valid" (Ivankova, 2015, p. 16). Pragmatists argue that the two forms of method- quantitative and qualitative- have fundamental similarities that serve as a sound foundation for combining the two processes in conducting research; specifically, both qualitative and quantitative methods use data to draw conclusions, both follow the same methodological steps necessary for conducting research, and both use strategies to ensure validity of their study outcomes (Ivankova, 2015). This way of thinking about both inquiry and knowledge ultimately rejects the idea that one of the two forms of method is more appropriate than the other in understanding a particular phenomenon, and holds true that the research questions guiding a study are

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more important than the methods used- ultimately suggesting that researchers do "what works" in their endeavors (Ivankova, 2015).

Pragmatism, according to Johnson and Gray (2010), is defined by several principles that set it apart from other philosophical perspectives. They suggest that pragmatism: (a) rejects dichotomous either-or-thinking, (b) poses that knowledge comes from person-environment interaction, (c) views knowledge as both constructed and resulting from empirical discovery, (d) takes the ontological position of pluralism, (e) views theories as instruments for inquiry rather than instruments of finding truth, and (f) incorporates values directly into inquiry and endorses equality, freedom and democracy (Johnson & Gray, 2010). From these principles evolved the mixed method research design, which is the foundational strategy of inquiry in this action research project.

Mixed Method Design. Mixed method design is a "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry" (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4). As such, there are several characteristics that differentiate the types of mixed method designs utilized by researchers, including the number of qualitative and quantitative strands, the sequence of data collection and analysis procedures, the emphasis given to either type of inquiry, and the process of integration of both methods in attempting to infer outcomes (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). This particular research project was driven by three research questions, two of which were qualitative in nature, and one that was mixed-method due to an intervention being implemented. The researcher collected data concurrently and

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placed higher priority on qualitative methods in order to give ECE teachers a strong voice in the data for future research to build upon.

Setting

Chapter One Preschool (COP) is an ECE setting in a large western state that is licensed to provide childcare and early education to children ranging from 12 months of age until age five, with an afterschool program for school-agers. COP is a medium-sized ECE setting, in that it has one one-year-old classroom, one two-year-old classroom, one three-year-old classroom, one four-year old classroom, and a school-age classroom. The site has a current enrollment of 81 children, some of whom attend only a few days a week, and others that attend full time. COP is open five days a week from 6:00AM until 6:30PM, provides a structured schedule from drop off to pick up for children in each classroom, and provides breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack to children depending on the length of time they spend at the site. COP is a privately owned ECE program, and the owner is very involved in the day to day running of the school.

COP employs a director, an assistant director, a cook, and 10 full-time teachers. All of employees at the site are female, with exception of the owner. Of the 81 children enrolled in the program, 77% (n=63) are attending based on their families receiving subsidies for childcare, and 8% (n= 7) are in state custody and placed in foster homes. The program enrollment is mixed in terms of child ethnicity and racial background, with 40% (n= 32) of the children being Hispanic/Latinx, 40% (n=32) of the children being African American, 10% (n= 8) of the children being Caucasian, and the remaining 10% (n=8) of the children being of other ethnicities.

COP created a parent handbook nearly several years ago that outlined the specific process that they take when it comes to a child that may have a presenting concern or challenging behavior. The handbook suggests that the program takes a step-wise approach, starting initially with a parent conference and culminating with a meeting with the director and owner discussing alternative options- ranging from having the family provide supports in the classroom to having the family choose a more suitable program to meet their child's needs. The researcher will be examining teacher experiences with caregivers specifically when it comes to a child that they perceive to have challenges in the classroom, which could place them at risk for disciplinary measures. The researcher will only focus on these initial phases, as she is examining the influence that teacher-caregiver relationships may have prior to the final step in their disciplinary process. At the time of study, the ECE program had three children that they recently identified as having behavioral challenges in the classrooms, and were therefore at the initial stage of the site's disciplinary process.

Challenging behaviors. According to the Center for Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) at Vanderbilt University, challenging behavior is defined as "any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with learning or engagement in prosocial interactions with peers and adults, and behaviors that are not responsive to the use of developmentally appropriate guidance procedures" (Challenging Behavior, n.d., p.3) . Examples of these behaviors include, but are not limited to: prolonged tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive vocal and motor behavior, property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, and withdrawal (CSEFEL). Due to the relationship between a child's social-emotional behavior concerns and preschool

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expulsion (Gilliam, 2005; Kaufman & Wishmann, 1999), the following section outlines the current presenting behaviors of the children identified at the site as those needing intervention.

At time of data collection, there were three children attending COP that were reported to be exhibiting challenging behavior in their classrooms on a daily basis. The program coordinator described the behaviors observed as such: hitting/kicking, inability to self-soothe, unable to play in group setting, and expressing aggression towards adults and other children. The site director informed the researcher that the teachers have only started to observe these behaviors, and therefore are at the onset of attempting to support these children in the classroom with these challenges.

Recruitment and Participants

The participants of this action research study were recruited through purposive sampling, which is a recruitment strategy that aligns with the researcher's purpose and questions. The purposive sampling technique is utilized often in action research studies, as it allows for selection of certain "units or cases based on a specific purpose...that will yield the most information about a particular phenomenon." (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 81). The purpose of this action research study was to examine teacher experiences with caregivers in a specific ECE setting: Chapter One Preschool. Therefore, the researcher recruited participants from the staff members employed at the site.

Selection criteria for this study included ECE teachers that currently work at COP. Out of the 12 individuals that are employed at the school, eight teachers participated voluntarily in the intervention, and both the director and assistant director attended, however the researcher did not collect data from the administrative staff. The

researcher purposively sampled five of the eight participants to engage in semi-structured interviews pre- and post-intervention, based on their history in working with children that have exhibited challenging behaviors and have been, or are currently, at risk for expulsion (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). All eight of the participants participated in the pre- and post- survey and journaling portion of the data collection process. The researcher collected data solely from teachers, because they spend the most time with the children, are aware of the potential challenges that a child may have throughout the day, and make the initial decisions regarding how to respond to a child's behavior (e.g. write an incident report, contact the director, etc.). Further, teachers interact the most with a child's caregivers during transition to and from school, and therefore have the most experience engaging in these conversations. All participants reviewed consent forms and verbally agreed to participate in the study prior to beginning data collection process.

The eight ECE teachers selected for participation are currently employed at COP. All eight participants are female, 37.5% (n=3) of whom are Caucasian, 37.5% (n= 3) of whom are Hispanic, and 25% (n=2) of whom are African American. Participant ages range from 19 years to 32 years of age. Participants have worked in the ECE field ranging from 1 year to 13 years, with the average amount of experience working in ECE of 8 years. All 8 participants (n=8, 100%) have a high school diploma, three (n=3, 30%) have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, and one (n=1, 10%) has a bachelor's degree in early childhood. All 8 participants are up to date with their continuing education units, as it is a requirement for the site to remain open and for teachers' continued employment. All 8 participants work full time at the site at 40 hours per week, and have shifts that allow them to have at least one interaction opportunity with

caregivers throughout the day- either at drop off or pick up. Table 1 displays information on the teacher participants (all names are replaced with pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality).

Table 1. *Participant demographics*

Teacher Name	Age	Ethnicity	Years Teaching in ECE	Current Classroom
Melissa	30	Caucasian	10 years	Fours
Callie	32	Hispanic	5 years	Twos
Jenny	27	Caucasian	13 years	Ones
Dana	32	African American	10 years	Threes
Vanessa	26	African American	10 years	Twos
Delia	19	Hispanic	1 year	Floater
Tara	30	Hispanic	8 years	Twos
Kristina	32	Caucasian	8 years	Floater

The researcher introduced the project and purpose of research to the entire staff of COP during one of their staff meetings in July of 2019. The eight ECE teachers participating in the study engaged in either some of or all of the data collection methods. Five of the participants engaged in semi-structured interviews prior to implementation of the intervention, in order for the researcher to gather initial perspectives of teachers and adequately answer RQ 1 and RQ 2. Further, all 8 participants engaged in both the journaling process and pre- and post-survey, in order for the researcher to gain insight into RQ 3. Finally, five of the teachers participated in semi-structured interviews with the

researcher post-implementation of the intervention, in order to triangulate data from the journal entries and survey and more comprehensively answer RQ 3.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher who steered this project is a Caucasian, young-adult female that completed her high-school degree, bachelor's degree, and a master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy prior to initiating this doctoral program. The researcher graduated with her master's degree in 2012, and has been working both in the state and private sectors of the mental health subdivision of social services in a large Western state. Specifically, the researcher was doing family, couple and individual therapy for the seven years leading up to the start of the doctoral program, and continued to work full time throughout the coursework and project completion. The researcher served as an ECMHC at the onset of the program, however transitioned to a hospital setting in early 2019 in order to provide clinical support to children with pediatric cancer.

The researcher conducting this study previously served as early childhood mental health consultant, however did not assume that role throughout the action research process in order to increase validity of the study and eliminate potential bias and/or moderation of results due to an existing consultative relationship. Therefore, the researcher had only one role: that of the researcher. The researcher engaged face-to-face with all teachers that partook in the study, as they participated in the relational cultural intervention and data collection. The researcher oversaw all steps of the data collection process; specifically, the researcher introduced the project to the staff, provided teachers with data collection tools necessary to conduct this study, created specific journal prompts, implemented the intervention, and facilitated reflective group meetings in

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between training sessions to strengthen the integration of learning. The researcher also conducted all data analyses throughout the study.

Intervention

  The intervention designed for this action research study was crafted to provide ECE teachers with comprehensive information on the ways in which culture and empathy influence relationships, specifically in terms of the relationships that they are engaging in with families whose children are at risk for expulsion. The intervention consisted of two components that were intended to complement each other and deepen the learning process: (a) Relational Cultural Communication Training (three in-person module trainings), and (b) two reflective discussion sessions in between trainings. The intervention, based centrally on the constructs outlined in RCT (Miller, 1976), was fashioned to include evidence based adult learning strategies throughout training modules (Lindeman, 1926; Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012; McCall, Padron & Andrews, 2018), and was delivered by the researcher using the consultative stance in order to enrich understanding through relationship-based capacity building (Johnston & Brinamen, 2006).

  Adult learning strategies. In order to sufficiently implement the training modules that make up the RCCT with participants of the study, the researcher implemented evidence-based adult learning strategies throughout. The science of adult education and learning, a concept known widely in the literature as andragogy (Knowles, 1968; McCall, Padron & Andrews, 2018), speaks to the importance of several practices when it comes to meeting an adult-learner's needs, shifting focus from typical frameworks that are focused on a teacher's process and outcomes to those of the students'

outcomes. The question as to whether or not adults are actually able to learn has been of focus in the literature since the 1920s, when Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton and Woodyard published the first book dedicated to the process of learning in adulthood called *Adult Learning* (1928). As inquiry evolved, researchers realized that adults *were* able to learn, and that adult learning was differentiated than childhood learning, and as a result several theories surfaced that were then focused on the *ways* in which adults learn and obtain knowledge (Merriam, 2001).

There are five underlying assumptions of andragogy that describe the adult learner: (a) the adult has an independent self-concept who can direct his or her own learning, (b) has accumulated a rich reservoir of life experiences that is a resource for learning, (c) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (d) is problem centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (e) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Knowles, 1968). Malcolm Knowles, the seminal researcher on andragogy, built upon those assumptions, stressing the need for adult learning settings to be a place where adults feel respected, supported and accepted, and a "spirit of mutuality exists between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (Merriam, 2001, p. 5). Over time, several specific and evidence-based strategies have evolved from these initial assumptions, that support the learning process intended in this action research project.

Participants of this action research proposal were all adults, which is a fact that lends itself to the need for adult learning strategies to be incorporated into the training should the ultimate desired outcome of increased knowledge and awareness be achieved. A literature review conducted by McCall, Padron and Andrews (2018) sheds light on the

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specific strategies/themes that the researcher considered as she delivered the training intervention, including (a) the role of the instructor, (b) the diversity of learners, and (c) the nature of learning experiences.

In considering the role of the instructor, the researcher attempted to take on a "collaborative colleague" role with the participants and maintained that each participant had their own history of experience and prior knowledge (McCall, Padron & Andrews, 2018). The researcher refrained from assuming that the participants had the knowledge and skill sets necessary to understand the training, and instead offered participants to support the co-construction of how the trainings would be held based on their learning needs. Aligned with the role of the researcher is the need for participants to feel emotionally safe during the training, which requires ample attention to the differences among those participants in attendance (McCall et al., 2018). Specifically, the literature on adult learning suggests that instructors must be sensitive to the unique viewpoints, attitudes, cultures and values that participants may hold as they partake in a learning process, as well as implement inclusive practices into their instruction. The researcher ensured that the diversity of learners was considered throughout the intervention by setting co-created goals with the participants at the beginning of each module, checking in with participants constantly throughout, and considering the training more of a reciprocal, collaborative dialogue rather than a training wherein the researcher is the expert.

Another strategy that the researcher utilized in alignment with adult learning was to consider the nature of the learning experience for the participants (McCall, Padron & Andrews, 2018). Specifically, the literature suggests that providing adult learners with the

lesson plan or training objectives provides structure and predictability that supports

overall comprehension. Further, providing learners with instructional supplemental

handouts or resources supports the learning process and integration of concepts. The

researcher provided participants with objectives at the beginning of each module and

offered resources throughout the training that were aimed to support further

understanding of concepts discussed. Finally, the researcher allowed for ample peer-to-

peer learning opportunities, in-depth discussions, and interactive, engaging activities

throughout the trainings, which are all strategies encouraged by the literature when it

comes to adult learning.

      Consultative stance. The consultative stance, a "way of being" coined by

Johnston and Brinamen in their early work on ECMHC (2006), is deemed in the research

on mental health consultation as the most vital ingredient to successful work with ECE

programs and teachers. The consultative stance, at its core, is the "way" of the consultant,

and speaks to the power of relationship-based work that holds the belief that the way

people are treated influences a person's sense of self, which in turn influences how that

person is with others. More comprehensively defined, the consultative stance is

> How the consultant "is" — his or her demonstration of interest, empathy, respect
>
> and understanding — is central to successful consultation. Then, in what is termed
>
> a "parallel process," the positive experience of the relationship between the
>
> effective consultant and the early care and educator, influences the relationship
>
> between the early care and education provider and the children in his or her care
>
> and their families. This captures the "how" of consultation that can be hard to

relay when describing the work of mental health consultation (The Center for

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation).

Johnston and Brinamen (2006) outline ten key elements of the consultative stance that set

the practice apart from other forms of relational learning. Those ten elements are: the

centrality of relationships, the parallel process as an organizing principle, avoiding the

position of the expert, mutuality of endeavor, understanding another's subjective

experience, considering all levels of influence, hearing and representing all voices,

wondering instead of knowing, patience, and holding hope (Johnston and Brinamen,

2006). In order to enhance understanding and potential integration of concepts by the

ECE teachers participating in the study, the researcher engendered the consultative stance

throughout the data collection process, starting at the initial meeting and maintaining the

practice throughout interviews, trainings, etc. Emulating the consultative stance in this

process suitably allowed for the researcher's background in mental health as a clinician to

coalesce with her role as the investigator leading this action research project.

      Module trainings. Three module trainings, designed specifically to illuminate the

concepts in RCT within the context of ECE, were provided to staff one time per month

between the months of August and October of 2019. Table 2 provides an outline of the

three modules prior to implementation of the training, however the topics and discussion

points evolved as the trainings occurred, in order to hold space for the co-creation of the

learning process.

Table 2. *Overview of Relational Cultural Communication Training*

Module	Topics Covered	Interactive Activities
1- Relationships in ECE	- The problem at hand- preschool expulsion - Research/data on family school relationships - The need for improvement	- Grounding exercise - Group/pairs work - Role play - Video
2- Mutual Empathy	- Definitions - The concepts of connection and disconnection - Empathy in action	- Grounding exercise - Group/pairs work - Role play - Video
3- Cultural sensitivity	- Definitions - Cultural oppression - Culture in context of ECE - Bias	- Grounding exercise - Individual reflection - Role play - Video

Reflective discussions. In alignment with the ECMHC model (Hunter, Perry, Davis & Jones, 2016), reflective discussions with individual teachers or small groups of teachers during the interim weeks between the trainings occurred, to enrich learning and allow for processing of concepts discussed. Reflective practice is central to the effectiveness of consultation, as it allows for both consultants and consultees to

> Think about and question personal influences and actions before, during, or after
>
> consultative interactions. Reflective practice allows for the consideration of the
>
> influences on and perspectives of others (e.g., child/family/staff) in the context of
>
> consultation…it promotes reflective practice in consultees, using this experience-

based learning to support consultees' professional growth and development."

(Hunter et al., 2016, p. 14).

The researcher provided this reflective opportunity to participants within the intervention

time frame on two separate instances, intentionally after each training module. The

researcher bridged the discussions from the prior training, reiterating the topics discussed

and then left the remainder of the discussion open with little prescription, to emulate that

of the consultation process.

Data Collection/Sources

The data sources for this study included two rounds of semi-structured interviews,

both prior to and post-implementation of the intervention, a pre- and post- survey

instrument, and journal entries completed throughout the data collection semester. Data

collection began in July of 2019 and culminated by November of 2019. Table 3

represents the data collection sources as they pertain to the research questions.

Table 3. *Research Questions and Data Resources*

Research Question	**Data Sources**
1. What role do ECE teachers perceive that **culture** plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?	Semi-structured Interviews (July 2019) Journal entries (July 2019- November 2019)
2. What role do ECE teachers perceive that **empathy** plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?	Semi-structured Interviews (July 2019) Journal entries (July 2019- November 2019)
3. How and to what extent does participation in a Relational Cultural Communication training	Survey (July 2019; November 2019)

(RCCT), designed to help ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, influence teacher **attitudes** towards building relationships with families?	Semi-structured Interviews (November 2019) Journal entries (July 2019- November 2019)

Review of terms. Recall from earlier chapters that two key concepts from relational cultural theory (Comstock et al., 2008) that are central to the researcher's intervention are (a) culture and (b) empathy. Specifically, the researcher intends on examining ECE teachers' perspectives on the definitions of the concepts, how (if at all) they feel they influence their relationships with caregivers, and how efficacious they feel in considering both concepts as they engage in difficult conversations about preschool expulsion. In order to formulate interview questions that align with the intervention, the researcher utilized RCT's framework to define both concepts.

Culture. Consistent with the several theories that shed light on the influence of culture on an individual's experiences, RCT suggests that movement toward connection over the course of individuals lives is made in relational contexts that have been "raced, engendered, sexualized, and situated among dimensions of class, physical ability, religion, or whatever constructions carry ontological significance in the culture." (Walker, 2002). The theory also posits that disconnections in relationships are often linked to individuals' multiple social identities that are intimately connected to their culture; those disconnections, in turn, can only be mitigated when individuals have knowledge and awareness of the ways in which "cultural oppression, marginalization, and various forms of social injustice lead to feelings of isolation, shame and humiliation

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among persons from devalued groups." (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280). That knowledge and awareness, the theory suggests, promotes relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies necessary for meaningful, trusting interactions to ensue (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT, as a result, sheds valuable light onto the impact that culture has on an individual's ability to connect with others, and although marginalization is often situated within the larger systemic context, "it is necessarily enacted in the context of interpersonal relationships." (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 52).

Empathy. The concept of empathy, and more specifically mutual empathy from the RCT framework, is described in the literature as "an openness to being affected by and affecting another person." (Baker Miller, 1976). Empathy, according to RCT, involves both emotion and logic, and involves four central capacities: (a) the capacity for emotional response, (b) the mental capacity to take the perspective of the other, (c) the ability to regulate emotions and (d) the level of awareness of self and others (McCauley, 2013). Relational cultural theorists postulate that individuals who are able to commit to a richer understanding of both their own and the other individual's experiences ultimately engage in genuine connection that allows for an overall deeper compassion for the other individual involved (Comstock et al., 2008). Empathy, therefore, is a critical concept for individuals hoping to engage in meaningful relationships, in that it provides opportunity for more effective and sustained interactions among people, more acceptance of individual differences, and more possibility for conflict resolution and decision making (McCauley, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews- First phase. In order to gather qualitative data to answer RQ 1 and RQ 2, the researcher facilitated semi-structured interviews with six

participants within the first month of data collection, that were conveniently sampled

from the 8 participants. The researcher scheduled the 30-minute interviews with each of

the participants at a convenient time during a work day in the month of July in 2019, and

facilitated the interviews at the site (COP). The researcher completed these interviews by

mid-August, prior to implementation of the intervention. The researcher engaged in this

initial cycle of interviews in order to gather baseline descriptions of teacher experiences

when it comes to communicating with caregivers, specifically prior to participation in the

relational cultural intervention. The researcher sought to better understand teacher

perceptions of how both empathy and culture play a role in these relationships, prior to

exposure to the concepts in the intervention. A copy of the interview protocol can be

found in Appendix A.

  Journal entries. During a staff meeting at the site in early August, the researcher

provided all teachers who are participating in the intervention with a journal. The

instructions for the journal were discussed both verbally and in writing on the inside of

the journal. The researcher provided teachers with both the opportunity to journal freely

about their experiences, as well as provide the teachers with prompts surrounding

particular experiences that they have in their engagement with caregivers. The researcher

created prompts that are tailored specifically to the research questions that guide this

study. The researcher checked-in with teachers on their journaling during group

meetings, and collected journals at the end of the data collection progress for coding

purposes. A copy of the journal protocol can be found in Appendix B.

  Semi-structured interviews- Second phase. In order to corroborate data

collected from the journals and the survey, the researcher conducted a final round of

semi-structured interviews toward the end of data collection semester. The researcher again scheduled semi-structured interviews with five of the teachers participating in the study, during nap time during their work day. The researcher asked questions almost identical to those asked in the initial interview process, however all questions began with this qualifying statement: "After participating in a relational cultural intervention…". Qualifying the initial interview questions with this statement in the second phase of interviews allows the researcher to determine if participants experience a *shift in their interpretations* of their experiences, which aligns with the constructivist framework guiding this study. A copy of the second phase interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

The researcher began the data collection process in the summer of 2019, concluded data collection by the end of the semester in December 2019.

Survey. The third research question that guided this action research study was mixed-method in nature, calling for one of the data sources to provide quantitative information. The researcher chose to utilize a short yet inclusive 16-item survey tool in order to gather pre-intervention and post-intervention descriptive data, as it is a user-friendly tool that is both realistic and sufficient for purposes of this action research study. The survey utilized in this study was developed using the evidence-based provider/teacher measure created by the Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Head Start (OHS) and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) (Kim et al., 2015).

FPTRQ. The FPTRQ project was a four-year effort that aimed at creating five unique measures utilized to examine the several features of family- provider/teacher relationships in ECE (Kim et al., 2015). The project was fueled by the fact that researchers, practitioners and policy makers have been increasingly recognizing the powerful impact that teacher-caregiver relationships have on the quality of child experiences in ECE programs. More specifically, the project's team of researchers crafted their measures due to the literature that has suggested a link exists between positive teacher-caregiver relationships and teacher outcomes, including (a) teacher feelings of competency, (b) teacher feelings of self-efficacy, (c) teacher connectedness with families, and (d) enhanced skills in communicating with families (Brown et al., 2009; Trivette et al, 2010). The researchers took several comprehensive steps in their creation of the measures, to ensure they held a strong evidence base, including developing a conceptual model, consulting with several experts, conducting nine focus groups, reviewing 62 existing measures, conducting interviews, and conducting a pilot study and a field study (Kim et al.; 2015).

The measures have been utilized across several contexts and by several stakeholders, specifically researchers. The creators of the measures stated that "researchers could use the FPTRQ measures in the evaluation of *targeted interventions* that aim to improve provider facilitation of family and provider/teacher partnerships or those that aim to enhance provider/teacher knowledge and practices" (Kim et al., 2016, p. 44). Because of this, the researcher found the provider/teacher measure to be suitable in supporting data collection for this action research project, as it aims to deliver a targeted intervention crafted to support family and provider/teacher relationships.

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The provider/teacher measure. The provider/teacher measure, developed by the FPTRQ, asks questions to ECE teachers about their experiences engaging with parents of children in their care (Kim et al., 2015). Specifically, the tool aims to gather information about three broad constructs that are each broken down into several sub-constructs, and consists of 64 items total. Due to the nature of the research questions guiding this study and the time frame in which the study was conducted, the researcher chose to examine one of the broad constructs embedded in the tool: teacher attitudes.

Attitude construct. Utilizing the framework developed by Azjen & Fishbein (2005), the researchers behind the FPTRQ defined attitudes as "the teachers'/providers' beliefs and values about families and children in their care that inform their work with these families" (Kim et al., 2015, p. 9). The researchers identified four sub-constructs that engender the concept of attitude in their measures, with three of those constructs being included in the teacher/provider measure: (a) respect, (b) commitment, and (c) openness to change. As discussed above, the researcher pulled the 16 survey items from the FPTRQ teacher/provider measure that were centered on the attitude construct, and created a survey form. The survey form can be found in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted qualitative analyses on three of the four data sources: the initial interview, the journal entries, and the post-intervention interview. The researcher also conducted quantitative data analysis on one of the four data sources: the pre- and post- survey tool, obtaining both descriptive and inferential statistical information. The process that the researcher engaged in for each type of analysis are further described in the sections below.

Qualitative analysis. Although there is not a streamlined approach to qualitative data analysis, the researcher aimed to provide structure to the process in which she engaged in a step-wise manner. Creswell (2009) outlined a sequence of steps for qualitative analysis that the researcher followed, in order to strengthen the research design and outcomes of the study. First, the researcher collected the raw text data from the interviews and had them transcribed verbatim by a transcription service, and collected journal entries directly from the participants and entered their raw notes into Microsoft Word. Second, the researcher reviewed a small subset of interview and journal entry data, in order to get a general narrative and be able to "reflect on overall meaning" of the story being told (Ivankova, 2015, p. 235), before initiating the coding process. Next, the researcher entered the interview text and journal entry data into a qualitative data analysis software program called HyperRESEARCH, in order to efficiently begin the coding process that ultimately resulted in a generation of categories and themes characterizing the findings. The researcher, once having the categories and themes, lastly decided how to present the findings in the analysis section of this project, and interpreted the meaning in the discussion. A more detailed description of the coding and analysis process is outlined in the following section.

Coding and theme development. In order to comprehensively transform data into findings in a pragmatic manner, the researcher utilized two coding strategies: an inductive coding process (bottom-up) and a deductive coding process (top-down) (Ivankova, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mertler, 2012; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). As such, the researcher used an analytic tool called thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001), that draws on "core features that are common to many approaches in qualitative

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analysis…broad structures and specific steps can be easily found in many other analytic techniques; for example, grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), framework theory (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), and many others" (p. 387). Thematic analysis parallels Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method in that it results in three basic components from an inductive standpoint, and at the same time encompasses the deductive process of "sifting, charting, and sorting material based on established key concepts or themes" (Attride & Stirling, 2001, p. 177). Similarly, Ivankova (2015) suggests that there are three types of codes that action researchers are able to utilize in the analysis process: (a) emergent codes gathered inductively in the raw text sources, (b) predetermined codes that stem from pre-existing theory and literature, and (c) a combination of both emergent and predetermined codes. The use of both coding strategies in this study fell within the parameters of the pragmatic paradigm that directed this project.

The researcher conducted several rounds of coding utilizing the constant comparative process outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), initially labeling sections of text data with codes capturing the basic meaning of the information. After the initial coding process of two interviews and two journals that resulted in several codes, the researcher identified codes that overlapped and shared similar meaning, which allowed for a reduction in the number of codes and a more succinct display of the information.

Initially, the researcher identified 133 open codes, which she then refined into a smaller list of 35 codes that ultimately shaped the categories, themes and assertions that resulted. Table 4 represents a sample list of refined codes based on frequency, with some

examples of open codes that fell under the same concept. A full frequency list of open

codes can be found in Appendix E.

Table 4. *A sample of the refined list of codes with open code examples*

Refined Code	Open Code Examples
Approach to discipline	Consistency, expulsion, modeling, narration, physical
Approach to communication	Defensiveness, self-regulation, empathy, patience, humility
Connection	Communication, attachment, help each other, teacher emotional response, parent response, empathy
Culture	Cultural differences, different races, family dynamics, trauma, bias
Disconnection	Blame, bias, close-minded, defensiveness, denial
Empathy	Emotions, depends on the parent, similar cultures, connection, acceptance, attribution
Parent-teacher relationship	Teacher response, patience, opportunity, connection, communication, transitions (drop off/pick/up)
Professional development (RCCT)	Acceptance, changing the way I think, connection, culture, empathy, sensitivity, attribution, teacher changing practices

In examining the refined codes, the researcher then aggregated the codes into

broader categories, that ultimately engendered a set of overarching themes that evolved

from the data. Using those themes as guidance, the researcher then formulated assertions

that wholly capture the essence of participant experience.

Quantitative Analysis. The researcher utilized a program called Qualtrics to transfer the 16 Likert-type questions from the FPTRQ into a user-friendly survey tool that the participants could easily access from their phones or computers via an anonymous link (Kim et al., 2015). The researcher then transferred the compiled data from an excel spreadsheet into a statistical program called The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis purposes. Once the data was transferred into SPSS, the researcher created nominal variables for the demographic information collected, such as name (which consisted of unique identifiers created by participants to ensure that pre- and post- data are paired correctly), gender, etc. After creating those variables, the researcher created new variable names for each item on the excel spreadsheet, using specific titles for each item based on (a) sub-construct and (b) time the information was collected (pre- or post-intervention). For example, items aligned with the sub-construct "Commitment to Working with Families" were labeled 01COMT1, 02COMT1…" indicating that they are COMMITMENT items gathered at TIME 1 (pre-intervention). Similarly, items collected during post-intervention will be labeled "01COMT2, 02COMT2…" to indicate the different data collection time point.

FPTRQ Likert scales. The FPTRQ user manual provided the researcher with the pre-determined and evidence-based response categories that respondents chose from as they answered the 16 items correlated with "attitude" (Kim et al., 2015). The response categories and corresponding codes utilized in the 16-item survey adapted for this research project are outlined in Table 5, along with the item numbers that correlate with the response categories.

Table 5. *Response categories from FPTRQ provider instrument.*

Response Category					Items using response category
Response Category 1	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 13,14,15,16
Response Category 2	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	11, 12
Code Value	4	3	2	1	

The FPTRQ manual specifically outlined the items that are to be reverse-coded when it comes to data analysis, and six of the 16 items utilized in this adapted version of the survey tool called for this reverse coding: items 2, 4, 13, 14, 15, and 16 (Kim et al., 2015).

Utilizing the categories, code values, and information regarding reverse coding discussed above, the researcher ran various quantitative reports to specifically answer the third research question that guided this study. Descriptive statistics were gathered to provide an account of the participants and their demographics. Further, paired-sample t-tests were run to compare differences among participant scores before and after the RCCT intervention.

Trustworthiness

Due to the nature of this case study and its focus on an individual ECE program, the outcomes of this project will only be generalizable to that very site. Stake (1978) suggests that these naturalistic generalizations often characterize the social sciences in that "the aim of practical arts is to get things done. The better generalizations are those that are more parochial, more personal." (p. 7). However, the trustworthiness and

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validity of the design and methods utilized are still critical to consider when it comes to the qualitative component of this study, and can be determined by a study's credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to increase credibility, the researcher utilized several data collection resources so as to triangulate, or cross check, the data; further, the researcher has also engaged in member checking, which is the process of continuous, informal testing of information by asking for participants to reflect on experiences during data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Similarly, in order to increase transferability, the researcher obtained thick descriptions of teacher experiences, so that future researchers can take parts of the narrative that fit into their particular contexts and naturally generalize to their own experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reliability

The provider/teacher measure from the FPTRQ project covers seven subscales under three broad constructs (Kim et al., 2015). Recall that, for purposes of this study and to answer the third research question, the researcher looked specifically at the "attitude" construct. The "attitude" construct included three of the seven sub scales on the FPTRQ provider measure: (a) commitment, (b) openness to change, and (c) respect. Cronbach's alpha values for the subscales were calculated during the field study conducted in 2014, and are detailed in Table 6 below.

Table 6. *Cronbach's alpha of the provider/teacher measure "attitude" construct, per the*

FPTRQ field study.

Provider/Teacher Measure	Number of Items	Number of Cases (Overall)	Cronbach's alpha value (α)
Construct: Attitudes	16	399	0.77
Subscale: Commitment	4	420	0.63
Subscale: Openness to change	8	404	0.74
Subscale: Respect	4	420	0.81

According to Tavokal and Dennick (2011), Cronbach's alpha measures the internal validity of a particular test, and in other words reveals how well a test measures what it should be measuring. Authors have varying perspectives on the value point that determines a desirable level of reliability, however most authors agree that anything over 0.7 is considered to have a good level of internal consistency. As such, the FPTRQ values displayed above suggest that the tool is quite reliable in terms of participant responses being similar. The researcher also conducted a reliability analysis to obtain the Cronbach's alpha values for the items specific to the reliability among participants in this particular study (outlined in Table 7).

Table 7. *Coefficient Alpha Estimates of Internal Consistency based on participant*

responses to FPTRQ (n=7)

Provider/Teacher Measure	Number of Items	Number of Responses (n)	Cronbach's alpha value (α)
Construct: Attitudes	16	N=7	0.51
Subscale: Commitment	4	N=6	0.79

Subscale: Openness to change	8	N=7	0.57
Subscale: Respect	4	N=7	0.65

The following chapter discusses the results of the data analysis conducted to successfully and efficiently answer the research questions that guided this action research project.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

*"These teachers need support… If they're kicking babies out of preschool, then these teachers are crying out that they need help." -*Walter Gilliam, 2018

This chapter outlines both the qualitative and quantitative findings that are associated with each of the research questions directing this study. First, qualitative findings aimed at answering RQ 1, RQ 2 and RQ 3 are presented as a result of constant comparative analysis of both participant interviews and journals. The analysis rendered categories, themes and assertions that succinctly describe participant experiences. Next, quantitative findings aimed at answering RQ3 are presented as a result of statistical analysis of the pre-and post-intervention surveys completed by participants. Recall that the research questions guiding this study are:

> *Research question 1*: How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that culture plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

> *Research question 2:* How do ECE teachers describe the role they perceive that empathy plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

> *Research question 3:* How and to what extent does participation in a Relational Cultural Communication training (RCCT), designed to help ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, influence teacher attitudes towards building relationships with families?

Qualitative Results

       In this section, results from the qualitative analysis conducted to answer all three research questions are presented. Table 8 displays the categories, themes and assertions that resulted from the comprehensive examination of both the interviews and journals that participants completed. The subsequent section then reinforces the themes and assertions that resulted using direct quotes from the data sources.

Table 8. *Categories, Themes and Assertions*

Categories and Themes	Assertions
Communication leads to connection. 1. Parent-teacher communication makes teachers feel connected to families and children. 2. Connection leads to consistency across environments and improved child outcomes. 3. Teacher face time with parents affects child outcomes.	1. At-risk children fare better in their classrooms when ECE teachers feel more connected to families via communication.
Cultural backgrounds and experiences influence relationships between teachers and parents. 1. Participants all experienced at least one adverse early childhood experience. 2. Similar backgrounds lead to more connection. 3. Teacher cultural backgrounds inform their biases.	2. Parent-teacher relationships in ECE are shaped by a teacher's ability to relate to and connect with a parent in terms of similarities in their cultural upbringings.
Negative interactions result in disconnection. 1. Experiencing blame affects parent/teacher relationships. 2. Parent approach to communication influences disconnection. 3. Defensiveness leads to disconnection and poorer childhood outcomes.	3. Disconnection between teachers and parents is often colored by negative interaction patterns, and ultimately leads to poorer child outcomes.

Empathy is practiced idiosyncratically with parents. 1. Teacher empathy depends on parent involvement with the child and school. 2. Teacher empathy depends on how parents approach discipline at home. 3. Teacher empathy increased with more communication with and a better understanding of parents.	4. Teacher ability to empathize with families and children is dependent on a parent's commitment to the wellbeing of their child while at school.
Professional development increases teacher awareness of their role when it comes to children at-risk for expulsion. 1. Teachers shared they will change the way they talk to parents, using empathy as a lens. 2. Teachers reported they will blame parents less for child behaviors. 3. Teachers shared they will ultimately accountability for children's outcomes with parents.	5. ECE teachers reported benefitting from training on relational concepts involving both culture and empathy, and shared that they feel shifts in their relational practice with parents will lead to better outcomes for children.

*Note: Themes are in italic font.

Assertion 1- At-risk children fare better in their classrooms when ECE teachers feel more connected to families via communication. The subsequent categories and themes cumulatively informed this initial assertion about teacher-caregiver relationships.

Communication leads to connection. Both pre- and post-intervention interviews as well as the journal exercise that participants engaged in provided insight into teacher perspectives that communication with caregivers/parents leads to a greater sense of

connection to both the child and family, specifically when it comes to children who are at-risk. In particular, participants spoke to three main notions when it comes to connection: they felt that (a) parent-teacher communication makes them feel connected to families and children, (b) connection leads to consistency across environments and improved child outcomes, and (c) teacher face time with parents affects child outcomes.

Parent-teacher communication makes teachers feel connected to families and children. Several of the participants discussed the positive impact that comes from having open communication with caregivers of children in their ECE setting. All participants linked the terms "connection" and "communication" as they shared their experiences. Jenny, a 27-year-old Caucasian female, affirmed this notion, stating that "if we can't communicate between me and the parent or vice versa, then we're not going to be able to help the child that is suffering either." She went on to explain that her connection with families is often dependent on the parents and their commitment to supporting their child. She said, "again I keep referring back to connection, but if there is no connection there, there is not empathy to give you because I don't know how to approach you." Kristina, a 32-year-old Caucasian female, shared a similar sentiment, stating "I try to work with the parents as much as they will allow me to, or as much as I can."

Dana, a 32-year-old African American female, reinforced the idea that communication with families leads to greater connection and understanding of a child and his/her needs. She stated, "interactions with me and the parent, it helps be understand their child." Tara wrote in her journal that "moving up from the twos room to the office was a big step…I actually talk to the parents on a personal basis…I am more

understanding to their needs and why they make the choices they make." Melissa, a 30-year-old Caucasian female, further endorsed this idea in her interview, maintaining

> If it is a good parent communication, then I'm more forthcoming and I kind of get excited to talk to those parents because I feel like yes, we can team up and we can help him or her through that behavior and hopefully get them on the right track.

Jenny supported this notion as she described her experience in connecting with parents who have children that might be struggling in her classroom, noting

> Yeah, and I have had parents like that too. You always have to reassure them that it's not just their child in specific. Every child learns differently, every child copes differently, every child shows empathy differently. It's not just like that one is the only one I have a problem with. Or not even necessarily a problem. That's not the only one that has struggles doing what they need to do. If you tell that parent, "I'm here to work with you. Let's figure out what we need to do. We can do it together." Not just, "I don't like your kid. Your kid is doing wrong," you know what I mean?

Connection leads to consistency across environments and improved child outcomes. All participants spoke to the important role consistency between home and school plays when it comes to children who are struggling with behavioral challenges. The teachers discussed the fact that, without communication with caregivers, consistency is rarely achieved. Jenny, a Caucasian female that has worked in ECE for 13 years, shared a personal experience that spoke to the importance of consistency, stating

> I speak that for myself too because my daughter was like that too. As a teacher, you can only do so much at school. Again, that goes back to balance. As the

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parent, you've got to do what you need to do at home, so if you can kind of find

that happy medium, you guys can come together and kind of figure out how to

really help everything…I want to know that they're doing the same thing at home

that I'm doing here, because if you're not doing it at home, then whatever I'm

doing here is just- yeah, so I want to be on the same page kind of thing.

Melissa, a Caucasian female that has worked in ECE for 10 years, shared a similar

sentiment about collaboration with families in order to increase consistency, explaining

If I know it is a parent who is like, 'No, I want to be here. I want to reinforce what

you're doing, then I find that any behavior is easy to talk about with them because

I can just reach out to them, and they will give me their opinion and their advice

on what I should be doing, and then I can reinforce that back and forth.

Vanessa, a 26-year-old African American female, reflected on an experience she

had with a child who spoke very little English, and how she and her mother

communicated to increase consistency and improve the child's emotional regulation. She

shared that "the child was often very frustrated because she would cry and I'm like,

'Honey, I'm sorry, I don't know'…so I spoke to her [mom] and she helped me. She

wrote down a few little words that would help direct the child in her own language in the

classroom." Delia, a 19-year-old Hispanic female, spoke to the manner in which

inconsistency across contexts can affect a child negatively in her classroom and how she

explains this to parents, stating "everybody has a different behavior in different settings.

You act different with your child at home versus when you're at work, so your child is

going to act different at school versus at home. I feel like parents don't get that." She

went on to discuss the importance in "being on the same page" as parents to alleviate

these confusing expectations for young children. Further, Jenny reinforced the other participant narratives by simply stating "whatever they practice at home, I want to practice here. Whatever helps them kind of progress more."

Teacher face time with parents affects child outcomes. Participants, in the pre- and post-interviews as well as in their journals, discussed the notion that having face to face conversations with parents helps them best understand the children in their classrooms, and ultimately improves child outcomes. Most participants discussed their viewpoints that parents are often not committed to this type of interaction with the teachers that care for their children. Jenny, a Caucasian teacher in the one's room, reported that

> Yeah, you have those parents that want to be involved, and then you have those parents, they will just shove them in the door, 'See you later' and that's it. I have a child in my room right now that I've had in there for a couple of months now, and I barely just learned the mom's name because she'll open the door, and she won't even open the door all the way. Just kind of shove the kid, 'Okay see you later'.

Kristina, a Caucasian female that has been working in ECE for eight years, shared that she has had similar experiences, stating, "one father. I don't know if he was the ruler of his castle or whatever, but he used to just come in and just push his child in." Melissa discussed the similar experiences she has had, explaining that "these parents, they don't have a whole lot of time…they just open the door and push their kid in. For me, my shift ends at 4PM, and most parents don't pick up until 5PM or 6PM." Delia, a 19-year-old Hispanic female that is a floater, shared her perspective on face to face conversations,

stating "I don't really like to use the app...I like to talk to parents at pick-up just because I feel like you interpret things how you want from a text, you know? I prefer to talk to someone in person versus through texts." The participants all expressed that it is much more challenging to work with families that don't allow for face to face conversation due to engaging in these quick drop-offs and pick-ups.

Assertion 2- Parent-teacher relationships in ECE are shaped by a teacher's ability to relate to and connect with a parent in terms of similarities in their cultural upbringings. Collectively, the qualitative data sources solidified both the theme and categories that allowed the researcher to infer about culture and upbringing and how it influences relationships in ECE.

Cultural backgrounds and experiences influence relationships between teachers and parents. The pre-and post- interviews and journals illuminated several consistencies among the participant narratives when it came to examining their cultural backgrounds and early experiences, specifically in terms of how they relate to caregivers and children in their classrooms. Surprisingly, every participant that interviewed had commonalities in their stories: (a) each participant had experienced something adverse in their childhood that influenced their decision to work in ECE, (b) participants felt more connected to those parents that had come from similar backgrounds as they do, and (c) participant biases are affected by their cultural experiences. Each of the commonalities will be discussed further and reinforced with narrative excerpts in the following sections.

Participants all experienced at least one adverse childhood experience. An illuminating finding that came from the qualitative analysis of the interviews and journals was the fact that each of the participants discussed their experiences in childhood that

were traumatic or adverse. The participants responded with information about those experiences when prompted to discuss their upbringing and cultural background. For example, Delia, the 19-year-old Hispanic female that works at COP, shared that she was the oldest of several siblings and as a result, shared "I never really got to grow up and be a kid for the most part…I was always taking care of my siblings. I remember my parents fighting all the time. But it's fine, you win some, you lose some. If I lost my childhood so siblings could have one, for me personally, I am okay with that." Jenny, a 27-year-old Caucasian female, discussed her parents' divorce and how that led to "a back and forth kind of thing, and then my dad kind of slipped out of the picture for a while…but then we lost my brother, when that happened it brought us all even closer together." Tara, a 30-year-old Hispanic female, told the story of her own adverse experiences, stating that "when I was a preteen, my dad had got in trouble and went to prison…my dad was in prison until I was…right before I turned 20." And, to further reinforce that the participants all experienced adverse childhood experiences in one shape or another, Melissa noted "my upbringing was definitely…my mom was 13 when she had me, so my grandmother raised me and it was very old school."

Vanessa, a 26-year-old African American female that has worked in ECE for ten years, vulnerably shared her experience growing up that shaped her, explaining

> I was actually, I grew up and was raised Muslim. I had both of my parents for a while, and after a while my dad went to prison… and my mom eventually didn't [follow the faith] because she didn't come from a Muslim background, she just converted…and so once he was gone, she switched everything back…there were nine of us children.

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Dana, a 32-year-old African American female, also shared some incredibly vulnerable information as she spoke about her upbringing, noting

> I didn't have a family when I was younger…from like, 7 to 18 I was in an out of foster care group homes and stuff like that. And then just like not having a close relationship with my brothers and sisters… I was separated from my brothers, yeah, but my little sister no. It has left me with a connection that I have when it comes to children. I don't know.

Similar backgrounds lead to more connection. Several of the participants discussed their perspective that their connection with parents or caregivers that *shared* similar experiences or the same cultural background they did was innately stronger than their connection with parents or caregivers who did not share those experiences. Melissa, a Caucasian teacher that has worked in ECE for 10 years, stated "I definitely think that it takes me a little longer to adapt to unfamiliar cultures to myself…I like to find out why. And some parents don't always give you the why, which does affect the child negatively." She went on to say, "I definitely think that if I have a like-minded parent who's on the same page as me, it's definitely a lot easier [to help the child]." Delia, a 19-year-old Hispanic female, corroborated Melissa's experience, maintaining

> Yeah, I feel like because we'll have similarities on things so it makes it easier to talk to someone versus someone who's from a different culture, a different background just because some who is raised like me, I was raised harder, more tough-love, like your fine, it's easier to talk to someone who's more like that because I'm like 'Yeah, we have a little scrape, but she was okay' rather than a parent who is soft.

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She went on to say "I feel like I am in an environment where there's more white and American people, and I notice they're more sensitive to their kids. So when I first started, it was kind of hard for me." Tara, a 30-year-old Hispanic female, shared her perspective that skin color can affect a parent's willingness to engage with their child's teacher, commenting "I have had challenges communicating with a parent who has a different background than me…in some type of way, yes. I think it depends on...some parents don't want to speak with you because you are not the same color as they are." Vanessa, an African American female, discussed her experiences trying to overcome these differences in order to support a child in her classroom, explaining

> Different ethnicities, yeah, come from different backgrounds and all that…a language barrier can sometimes be a very hard thing…so I spoke to her (mom) and she helped me…and I taught myself to be loving and kind of more towards her so that…she really trusted me and it was easy for her to come to me…I feel culture influences a person's ability to connect with a parent because her mom eventually came to me a lot, and she was like, 'she wants to be with you', so it did, yeah, it helped a lot. And mom also really, she felt really, she trusted me a whole lot.

Jenny, a Caucasian female, noted how she attempts to connect with children and families through engaging in their culture, to enhance the strength of their relationships and improve child outcomes. She asserted

> With holidays, we do holidays around the world. So, everybody that has different cultures is allowed to bring in what they celebrate with, pictures of what they celebrate with, so we can kind of see what cultures are within our building.

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There's a lot. I wouldn't know either. I think we show the parents that we want to

learn about their culture, they want to know about us, so it kind of brings us all

together as a whole kind of thing.

Tara discussed two specific realms of culture that she feels has led to

disconnection between herself and a caregiver in her classroom, speaking to the fact that

similarities lead to stronger connection: religion and sexual orientation. She notes

"sometimes religion falls under [culture] to me, too. I always ask, 'do you have any

specific religious beliefs or anything like that? And they usually tell me no, but we have

maybe one or two say yes. But it's really rare and they usually don't last long

here…because, I don't know. If I don't understand it, I think they feel they can't

connect." Similarly, Tara expressed challenges connecting with a parent who decided to

raise her child with a heightened awareness of the LGBTQ community at a young age,

stating, "I just do not get it when they are this little."

Teacher cultural backgrounds inform their biases. Participants discussed in both

their interviews and journal entries about how their childhood experiences have shaped

their biases and how they perceive parents and caregivers of the children that are in their

classrooms. Specifically, the teachers reflected on concepts such as racism, sexual

orientation, child welfare and discipline- all concepts that have a rippling effect on the

outcomes of young children in society today. Melissa, a 30-year-old Caucasian female

that has been in ECE for 10 years, wrote in her journal "as a teacher I find it difficult to

relate to parents that have had their children taken away from them through social

services." Kristina reported that she has bias when it comes to negative behavior, stating

"I do see a lot of…I call it the only child syndrome." Tara, a 30-year-old Hispanic

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female, shared that she currently has a child in her classroom whose mother identifies as part of the LGBTQ community, and that it triggered some bias in her towards the parent and child. She shared

> I've always been supportive, you do you, that's your choice, I'm all ears. But don't push on me. I'm my own person too, I have my own beliefs. I have a child in my room whose mother is verbal about her LGBTQ community and how she's trying to raise her son a part of that. So at first when I found out about her trying to bring him up into it, I didn't feel it was appropriate being that he was two years old. So for him not being able to understand and he's barely learning about his body, and how it's supposed to function…I didn't tell her [how I felt] because again it wasn't my place to bring it up to her and tell her that's not something you do.

Melissa shared how her upbringing influenced her perspective on race, and how as an adult she has struggled to have compassion for those parents that don't share that same compassion for inclusion and equity, noting

> My grandparents and great grandparents raised me. So it's a totally different culture for them. You don't talk to kids outside your race. You don't think outside your race. You don't… everything was racial. I think it was very biased, because I should have empathy for children that looked like me, but for children who did not look like me my parents didn't care what happened. So race definitely played a part in my upbringing. It was, if she had blonde hair and blue eyes and was a nice little girl, I was supposed to be nice to her. And if Susie had tight curly hair and dark skin, I was not allowed. And if I was mean to her, it was okay…so when

I was a child I was the mean girl, and I wanted to be nice. And then I became the

mean girl because I didn't understand why. I learned the wrong way to be a parent

through my parents.

Kristina, a 32-year-old Caucasian female that is a floater in all the classrooms,

expressed her personal bias when it comes to parenting children, asserting that "I believe

parents should have parent classes before they have kids." Jenny, also a Caucasian

female, reinforced the discussion on bias, explaining "I mean, you can go to the store and

see people give other races just different attitude than you would of your own race…I

used to have a parent that was like, 'I notice this child in this classroom is black. What's

his background?' to which I told her that I treat him just like I treat your child, the same."

Tara, a Hispanic female teacher, went on to reflect on discipline strategies that parents

utilize that she has personal biases about, specifically violent forms of redirection. She

noted "We have some parents that say 'oh put them in time out. Just spank them'. I do

have my personal things that come up when they tell us something like that."

Participation also informed teacher perspectives on their own biases and how they

come into play when engaging with parents, ultimately leading to changes in how they

interact with families for the better. Melissa, a Caucasian ECE teacher in the fours, wrote

in her journal about her transformation of understanding and awareness about her biases,

sharing

I have also learned that my internal bias affects how I relate to the parents as well.

I found it interesting to learn that I have biases that I don't mean to have but they

are based off of personal experiences that could also affect my relationship with

them. Over all this experience has taught me that I have to separate myself from

my biases in order to have a better relationship with the families so that we can all support the individual child's needs.

Jenny shared in her interview after participating in the intervention that "If we get more of an awareness of what everyone's culture is, we can kind of have more of a balance with each other, because if we're not on that same page and we're more against each other, then nothing's ever going to work. And then that child will be the one that suffers." Tara affirmed these experiences after participating in the intervention, nothing "I have more perspective now…like about bias. I try not to be biased." Kristina corroborated these insights, asserting that "Everybody has their own way of thinking. Just because you were taught this, to think this way about another culture, when you get older and you become an adult and you befriend or you get to know people, you can change all that."

Assertion 3- Disconnection between teachers and parents is often colored by negative interaction patterns, and ultimately leads to poorer child outcomes. The researcher, after comprehensively analyzing the qualitative data sources and identifying the following theme and categories, was able to infer that the negative manner in which teachers and caregivers interact adversely affects child outcomes.

Negative interactions result in disconnection. Participants in this study reflected on a wide array of experiences they have had that have resulted in a disconnected relationship with a parent or caregiver, namely due to particular interaction patterns that have occurred in discussing their child's challenges in the classroom. Specifically, participants spoke to three factors that commonly influence teacher-parent relationships and resulting child outcomes: (a) blame, (b) approach, and (c) defensiveness.

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Experiencing blame affects teacher-parent relationships. Several of the participants discussed the term "blame" in their narratives, explaining how a parent blaming them for a child's behavior and/or outcomes unfortunately leads to less commitment to supporting that child in their classroom. For example, Dana, a 32-year-old African American female that works in the threes room, wrote in her journal about a time a mother disenrolled her child and blamed the school for his behavior:

There was a child in my class that had a hard time detaching with mom at drop off. Every day he would cling to her and scream. It was frustrating because there was a communication barrier the mom spoke Arabic and had very broken English. I tried to help comfort her and support her being able to leave her child without feeling anxious. I sent her pictures in the app and wrote her often to let her know he was doing well. Within two weeks she disenrolled him because she was upset on how he acted during drop off.

Melissa, a Caucasian female teacher, reflected on blame and shared that she feels it is one of the most significant barriers she feels affects child outcomes, stating "I definitely get more frustrated… no matter what I say happened, they're looking for a different answer, so they place blame. Yes, yes, definitely. For me, that is the hardest part. Then it doesn't make me want to talk to that parent because I'm like, if you're reaching so far to try and blame your child's behaviors on something else, I can't talk to you because it is no longer productive." Dana, an African American teacher, shared that she feels "communication with parents could definitely get better…the blaming, yeah that could get better. The parents often blame us for everything, yeah." She went on to discuss the bad feeling she gets when a parent has made her feel "like I don't know what I'm

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doing. Like inside, it's like I've been doing this forever…sometimes I want to lash back."

Jenny, a Caucasian female that works in the ones room, reinforced the idea that blame is often a part of disconnection with a parent, and related it to lack of communication with a parent or caregiver. She reported "I have that parent that is like, 'well, then why is it always my child?', and I'll be like, 'well we never sat down and had a conversation. How am I supposed to help if we can't talk to each other?'"

    Parent approach to communication influences disconnection. One of the consistent threads that became clear throughout analysis of the interviews and journals was the fact that participants felt that the manner in which parents approached them often influenced the amount of tension within the teacher-parent relationship. Melissa, a Caucasian female teacher, shared that, in trying to engage in a discussion with a father about his son's aggressive behaviors, "with the dad, he absolutely did not respect anything I had to say and would get loud with me… so at the end of the day, it was like, there is nothing more that we can do for your child, and he was asked to find alternative childcare." She went on to share that parents "often get in [my] face... and I'm like, I need you to back up and go talk to my director." Dana, an African American female teacher, expressed the difficulty she has when parents come "at [me]", stating "you know, I definitely want to, you know, lash back, be like, 'I know what I'm doing. Obviously it's been working. You still bring your kid here every day." Tara, a Hispanic teacher, shared that her response to a parent depends on how they approach her when it comes to discussing their child with behavioral challenges, noting

    I think depending on the parent, I do get a little nervous depending on the parent.

    If I know that the parent, just day to day is calm and comes to me and talks to me,

then I think it's an easier conversation to slowly bring up the situation. But I know

for a fact that some, like I said before, parents get defensive. 'Oh, not my child',

you know?

Delia, a Hispanic female, reinforced the stories told by her coworkers, explaining

"I get anxiety. I'm like, oh my god, I don't want to make you mad. There are those

parents that just argue with you and they're like, well my child doesn't do that at home.

I'm sorry." Vanessa maintained that "the conversation when you have to tell a parent that

you think that they may have other issues going on. That's very, very challenging…

parents will try to lie and say that nothing's going on. Yeah. When it's kind of obvious."

Defensiveness leads to disconnection and poorer child outcomes. The code

"defensiveness" stood out significantly throughout the qualitative data sources, and was

identified more so than almost any other code throughout the analysis. Participants spoke

to the manner in which their own defensiveness towards a parent has negatively affected

a child's experiences in their classroom, as well as how a parent's defensiveness

adversely results in negative outcomes for children. Tara, a 30-year-old Hispanic female,

when asked how parents respond to being told their child is struggling at school, simply

stated "most of them get defensive." Kristina, a 32-year-old Caucasian female, shared her

experience with parents that become defensive, likening it to denial. She noted

> There's an answer to every problem. We just have to go look for it, and sometimes
>
> the parents either don't want to, they're defensive or in denial, don't have time,
>
> whatever their excuses are…I think it's more how they view their child, because a
>
> lot of parents ... I mean, come on, we're parents. So, maybe the parents are in, I
>
> would say, denial. I'm trying to reason, rationalize…'Well, I don't have this

problem at home.' So, I'm thinking, 'Okay, you're in denial because I'm watching how he acts with you. You have no control over your own kid."

Melissa, a 30-year-old Caucasian teacher in the fours room, corroborated the insights of her colleagues, asserting "I definitely get a little more frustrated if it is one of those parents, because you always have those parents that are like, 'No, not my kid, not my child. Well, what happened to make my child do that?' No matter what I say happened, they're looking for a different answer." She went on to assert "I definitely think that they get defensive a lot of times more than anything else… [I] definitely get the parents that are like, "Not my child, my child didn't do that." Kristina shared that she had a father "brush me off like I was dirt on his…I felt bad for me. I felt bad. And a little bit humiliated."

Participants were also able to reflect on how their own defensiveness can negatively affect their relationships with parents, and ultimately the children in their classroom. Delia shared that

> Sometimes I feel like it's harder to have empathy for adults when it comes to their kids just because, I feel like it's harder just the way they come at me, because once you come at me, and how can I say come at me and not use that word? Yeah, if they make it seem like I did something wrong because their child got hit, like if their child got bitten, they make it seem like it's my fault another child bit them. Well, that child bit your child because your child took their toy. They are two…That doesn't mean it's my fault. That just means I was walking towards them while they were fighting and the other child just happened to bite the other show.

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Melissa explained how she defends herself with parents using the school communication application. She asserted "I use the app so a parent can't ever say I never told them…it was my only option at the time, the child is becoming a danger to himself or others, and its affecting my classroom. Then I can be like, 'I have tried to communicate with you, I have reached out to you, and this is the last resort."

Assertion 4- Teacher ability to empathize with families and children is dependent on a parent's commitment to the wellbeing of their child at school. Exploring the notion of empathy from the RCT framework resulted in the following information, which led to an assertion about the ability for ECE teachers to empathize.

Empathy is practiced idiosyncratically with parents. One of the research questions that guided this study examined the manner in which teachers feel that empathy plays a role in their work with children who are at-risk, particularly in terms of the parent or caregiver. All participants discussed empathy in great detail, and shared that both their ability and desire to have empathy for a parent depends mainly on that particular parent or caregiver, specifically in terms of how committed they are to their child's success at school. Three factors were identified in the data analysis that teachers felt were integral in terms of their ability to have empathy for a parent: (a) parent involvement with the school, (b) parent approach to discipline at home, and (c) teacher understanding/knowledge of family dynamics as a result of increased communication.

Teacher empathy depends on parent involvement with both their child and the school. Most of the participants were able to identify that their ability to empathize with a caregiver or parent depended on how involved that parent was with the child's wellbeing at school. Participants made it clear in their narratives that parents who asked questions,

stayed to talk during pick up, attended school events, etc. were much easier to essentially "feel for" when it came to their child having challenges. Jenny, a Caucasian female in the ones room, shared

> Yeah. I don't want to say it depends on the parents, but it kind of does. If you have a parent that is involved and wants to volunteer and wants to just do all this stuff to help your classroom and the child, you have empathy back towards them because they're showing an effort, so why not show effort back? Again, I keep referring back to connection, but if there's no connection there, there's no empathy to give you because I don't know how to approach you.

> Melissa noted "I think it really depends on the parent. If I know it is a parent who is like, "No, I want to be here. I want to reinforce what you're doing," then I find that any behavior is easy to talk about with them because I can just reach out to them, and they will give me their opinion and their advice on what I should be doing, and then I can reinforce that back and forth." She went on to explain her perspective on how she attempts to have empathy, sharing

> I definitely try to be empathetic of their situation. I don't necessarily feel like I have to be empathetic towards them. But I'm empathetic of what they go through with their children, because if they have a very challenging child that they just don't know what to do with, I am like, okay, if that was me, I would probably feel the same way as the parent is. So empathy definitely comes to play in how I approach a parent.

> Tara, a Hispanic female, discussed her personal approach to having empathy, stating "In some cases…yes. I want to say usually with new parents…they're so worried

about their babies, we're new people…we have to reassure them…but [I] struggle to have empathy when a parent demands, so we try to give resources and help, and then it turns out that she's not implementing the same thing and just demanding what we do here." Delia, a Hispanic 19-year-old teacher what is a floater, noted that "it's harder for me to have empathy just because I don't like empathy personally. Sometimes I feel like it's harder to have empathy for adults when it comes to their kids just because, I feel like it's harder just the way they come at me, because once you come at me, and how can I say come at me and not use that word?"

Teacher empathy depends on how parents approach discipline at home. Some of the participants expressed frustration and disconnect from parents or caregivers that discipline in punitive and, at times, aggressive manners at home, leaving them less empathetic towards their circumstances with their child. The participants discussed their inability to empathize with parents who tell them to "just spank" their child or "just put them in time out", as they are unable to utilize those practice in the school setting. Jenny discussed her perspective, stating "if you have those parents that are like 'I don't care what happens…or whatever, and then just shoves them in the door, I don't have that empathy connection to you." Tara, a Hispanic female teacher, noted "we do have some parents that really just say, 'Oh, put them in time out. Just spank them.' I'll be like, 'I don't want to lose my job, so I can't do that." Delia shared "I feel like some people want like teachers to be super hard on their kids…I was adding to the app that [this child] was bleeding a little bit on his finger, and [mom] looked at it and said 'he's fine. You're fine. Let's go.' I didn't understand it." Melissa, the fours teacher, expressed her struggle with

empathizing with parents who utilize punitive measures to discipline their children, explaining

> If I know that that parent is just going to go home and spank the child for the
> behavior, I find it a little harder to communicate with that parent. I do have some
> parents that are just beating their kids on the way out the door, like, "Why were
> you bad at school?" and pop them on the head. I'm like, 'Well, that isn't really
> helpful because now your child doesn't like me because you are spanking them,
> and I already disciplined them.' That's when I find it more challenging.

She went on to discuss her struggle to have empathy for parents who want to simply discipline behavior rather than understand, sharing "I feel like the parents, they want to discipline. They don't want us to understand. They just want to discipline and correct, so that way it doesn't happen again, or, 'Now you're not getting your tablet.' Well, what does that do for me? Because they already don't get their tablet when they're here. That doesn't really reinforce the positive behaviors that I'm looking for." Kristina, a Caucasian teacher that floats throughout classrooms, shared how a parent's approach to discipline directly affects her ability to empathize with both a parent and child, explaining

> Yeah. Then they're, 'My child doesn't have to do anything at home, so you're
> telling him to clean up his toys,' and there is a total disconnect and it's very
> confusing on the child because I'm saying, 'You need to help. You help to make
> the mess, you have to help clean it.' And then when he goes home and he tells
> mom, 'My teacher made me clean up my toys and I didn't like it,' and then she
> says, "Oh, you don't have to clean up your toys. It's okay," then there's this total...
> confusion and disconnect from the house to the school.

Teacher empathy increased with more communication with and a better

understanding of parents. Participants lastly discussed their viewpoints concerning their

ability to empathize with parents in terms of how much they understood the parents and

children they have had in their classrooms based on open communication. Participants

also reflected on how the intervention led them to engage more with parents so that they

were better able to understand families, in hopes that child outcomes would improve.

Delia, a Hispanic female that floats throughout classrooms, noted that communication

with caregivers is helpful in that it "increases [my patience] for some kids. The

understanding of each child's needs and when you know their background and what

they've been through and stuff, you get more of an understanding, oh, that's why they're

like that, that's why they do that." Kristina shared that having parents observe in her

classroom to give her ideas as to how to best support their child increases both her ability

to empathize and enhances her understanding of the family. She shared "I try to work

with the parents as much as they will allow me to, or as much as I can. And we

encouraged the parents to come into the classroom if they can, but if they can't because of

the child having attachment or separation issues, then they have that window there so

they can see what the teachers have to deal with so they can ... you know, it helps a lot to

have those."

Melissa, a 30-year-old Caucasian female teacher, reported on her experience

getting to know a child's background and culture, and how it allowed for a greater

understanding of the family, leading to greater empathy:

I've seen multiple situations where culture has come into a huge part of the child

in the classroom. And so it's become just more open minded about okay this child

isn't having a behavior because they're just having a behavior. They're having a behavior because at home this is not the way they do things, and now if this is the first time they're in daycare, this is a whole new concourse for them. Yeah. So then it just makes me a little more understanding of how culture plays a part in that child's life.

Tara, a 30-year-old Hispanic teacher, discussed her utilization of the ECMHC that is assigned to the school as a support when it comes to wanting to engage and better understand parents. She explained "I have two or three children in my room right now that have challenging behaviors, and Jada (the ECMHC) helps a lot…so working with the parents directly, one-on-one, lets you know that to work together with us here that their child might not be doing at home, or they're not seeing it as a problem at home, but it is a problem here."

In reflecting on the intervention and how is supported an increase in teacher empathy, Jenny, a Caucasian female in the ones room, stated "I mean, I'm more open. I want as much information as I can take from them, as much as I can give them as myself." She went on to share how the intervention training helped her slow down, explaining "I'm always that person that's, I try to be as supportive as I can. I don't want a parent to feel that their child is the problem child, because I wouldn't want to feel the same way coming from my children's teachers…that's empathy". Melissa expressed her viewpoint that the training intervention has allowed her to have empathy for parents that she was unable to prior, asserting

I feel like I'm able to deal with the more challenging parents a little bit better than I was before. And that I can see, especially after the blame video, I can see when

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the parents are doing that and I can take it a little bit better than I could before.

Because I used to just like, "Okay, it's my fault." And "Okay, I'll do better." And

then if they did pull their child's or something happened, then I would be really

hard on myself.

Assertion 5- ECE teachers reported benefitting from training on relational

concepts involving both culture and empathy, and shared that they feel shifts in their

relational practice with parents will lead to better outcomes for children. The final

assertion the researcher was able to infer regarded the intervention and how it influenced

ECE teachers and their ability to support young children. The theme and categories that

supported this assertion are discussed below.

Professional development increases teacher awareness of their role when it

comes to children at-risk for expulsion. The intervention training that the participants

attended influenced their perspectives on both empathy and culture and how they play a

role in their relationships with families whose children are at-risk. All of the participants

discussed their shift in "awareness" of their role when it comes to engaging with parents

in correlation with how the children in their classrooms ultimately fare. Three specific

factors were identified throughout the interviews and journals that reflected participant

experience and how their participation in the intervention shifted their practices with

parents: (a) teachers changed the way they talk to parents, using empathy as a lens, (b)

teachers blamed parents less for child behaviors, and (c) teachers ultimately shared

accountability for children's outcomes with parents.

Teachers reported they will change the way they talk to parents, using empathy

as a lens. Participants shared their experiences participating in the RCCT intervention,

specifically in terms of their increased awareness of how they are engaging with families and empathizing with them. Jenny, a Caucasian female teacher, stated that the intervention "kind of opened up my eyes, to how I needed to change as their teacher." In responding to a question about implicit bias and empathy, and how they play a role in communication, she went on to share

> Yeah, because, I mean like that situation I told you the whole meeting the white teacher in a black classroom. Any given teacher could have taken that the wrong way, but I'm kind of like, "Okay, well if that's how they see me, then okay." but in my eyes, I don't see them as black children. I don't care if they're blue children. It's just, those are my kids, that's my room, those are my babies. So, when I experienced that first hand myself, I was kind of, "okay, wow, this is..." but then when you were teaching us about it and I was like, okay, this is where they're coming from, this is what I need to do reaction wise. So, again that common ground is really good to have.

Dana, when asked about her take-aways from participating in the intervention, noted "I remember we were talking about the empathy and sympathy. And so I have a couple of kid's parents who like their, their kid's behavior you could totally tell it's the parent. And so I'm just trying to show empathy instead of sympathy." Melissa, the fours teacher, wrote in her journal about her experience:

> I feel after the trainings and learning that to have empathy doesn't mean I have to agree with them but to be there for them to support the child's needs. I have also learned that my internal bias affects how I relate to the parents as well.

Tara, a Hispanic teacher, affirmed her colleagues' notions, saying "I just have like a better understanding now where both parents are coming from and like, "Oh now I know, that's why." She went on to say that her participation "I think it just made me more aware of how to approach. Do I need to be more sympathetic or, you know…because, at least I feel like I'm giving my input and I want to say if it really means something to you, you can feel it. People feel how you're saying it." Vanessa, an African American 27-year-old teacher, corroborated these experiences, sharing that participation in the intervention "Like, yes, I want to know. I actually want to know more, and I want to be able to communicate with the parents better, too. There's parents that have stuck out of my head, and I'm like, "How would I come across now? Like, how would I coach them?"

Teachers reported they will blame parents less for child behavior. One of the words that came up often in the pre-interviews that was addressed differently in the post-interviews was "blame". Specifically, participants shared that, after engaging in the intervention, they were able to zoom out and not immediately blame parents for a child's behavior. Dana, the African American threes teacher, shared

> It's hard. Because it's like when you're encountered with that kid you're like, "Oh, my god. What is mom doing at home- But like... and then when you try to talk to mom, she's like," Oh I just lost my job and dad is in and out" or, and then all of a sudden you think, "okay, maybe a little bit more patience with this kid because she's having a really hard time at home" or you know stuff like that. And so then it's like, " Okay, it's not this child's fault."

Jenny mentioned "So, if I could take a breath and be like, Okay, this is more about their situation rather…than 'Oh no, they're bad.' I now know this child needs more

love and more attention, rather than just giving him the boot. So now I feel like I have one compassion towards what I need to work harder on in that child and stuff." Vanessa went on to share how she is blaming the child and the family less in her practice as an ECE teacher, noting "In my class, I'm kind of more, instead of just being like, "No, why are you crying?' It's more like, 'Why are you crying?'…what can I help you with?' So, I'm trying to ... Not trying to shut this kid off too much, you know? I'm trying to understand him more." She went on to share how approaching communication differently with a parent has resulted in less blaming overall:

> Yes. I actually had to do it not too long ago. There was a child, and I know his mom works with relations. And he's usually here from early in the morning-... and he's here all day. So, when she comes to pick him up, I have to kind of ... I've learned to try to shift it with her, because I just realize that she works all day long. So ... I used to treat her more as like, telling her ... Just telling her all the bad, kind of. So, she used to come ... Whenever I used to tell her something at the end of the day, or I'm getting ready to, she's like, "What is it? What happened?" I try to throw in more good [in the conversation] to improve the relationship.

Melissa, the Caucasian fours teacher, shared that the intervention helped her zoom out in terms of blame, stating "It could have just been a bad day or that parent could have been having a bad day and just needed to put the blame on somebody. Or that child's going through a lot, which means the parent's going through a lot. So I think it just opened my eyes to the fact that it's not about Melissa all the time." She went on to share her perspective that communication eliminates disconnection between home and school, asserting "I think so because it was... there was obviously a missing key and that missing

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piece was the communication between school and home. It was like she's not going to try at school if she's getting scolded at home for not being able to write her name right. So it was just kind of cool to see and now she's trying." Her ability to respond to parents differently was also affected in a positive way, as she shared

I feel like I'm able to deal with the more challenging parents a little bit better than I was before. And that I can see, especially after the blame video, I can see when the parents are doing that and I can take it a little bit better than I could before.

Teachers reported they will ultimately share accountability for children's outcomes with parents. The final category that resulted from the qualitative analysis illuminated the fact that teachers felt more accountable in their roles after participation in the intervention, particularly in terms of child outcomes. Delia, the 19-year-old female Hispanic teacher, shared that she felt her role in a child's outcomes became more clear as she participated in the intervention, noting "as long as your child is with me, I'm going to do what I have to do to make sure your child is safe and emotionally okay while they're with me so that way I can... because I really like to focus on building a relationship with the kid before I do anything and my main goal is their trust first." Melissa, a 30-year-old Caucasian female, spoke to her accountability when it comes to a child's behaviors and outcomes by discussing her role as a teacher in her own classroom, saying, "And a lot of times it just, 'Okay, what do I not need to tell this parent because this parent obviously goes through a lot with this child already. What can I try to do better in the classroom?' More, try to handle myself, trying to be a little more empathetic to the situation rather than get frustrated with the situation and take it out on the parent." She went on to discuss her dedication and commitment to the children in her class, stating "I just feel like it's

given me more dedication to put forth full effort in the classroom for that eight to 10 hours a day that I'm with these kiddos and hope that I can educate the parents enough to where it is taken home with them."

Tara, a Hispanic female teacher, shared that participation in the intervention resulted in her ability to slow down with parents, using self-disclosure as a means for connection and accountability, as she herself is a parent of children in the ECE realm. She shared "Sometimes to calm them down I'd be like, 'Oh well I remember this one time when my son...'…Yeah, I'll be Like, 'Hey, it's okay. I've probably been through the same situation as you." She went on to discuss how the training normalized her experiences, which ultimately impacted her ability to feel accountable, mentioning

> I really liked your training. I felt like the videos and stuff that you chose really
> made us actually sit and think like, "Oh, oh yeah." Because before, you never
> really think about it until you sit and you listen to other people talking about it and
> you're like, "Oh, I'm not the only one." Because you always feel like it's only
> happened to you.

Dana, an African American female teacher, shared that her goal after participating in the intervention is to focus on the children's experiences at school as much as she can. She explained "And I want them to come to school and like- Be happy and make... Make a decision for themselves because who knows what is going on at home. So if that happens at school then they're excited to come to school and all 13 and one children are very excited to come to school…that makes me feel good." Jenny summarized the teachers' experiences and how they shifted their view of their accountability for a child's outcomes after participating in the intervention, asserting that her definition of empathy

changed. She said "I just kind of added to it, yeah. Just like I said, I don't look at the child as right off the bat being a bad kid. Right now I'd be like, 'okay, this one needs more help. This one needs more care and more love. This is the one that needs me more, my attention more every day.' And if I can do that in that short eight hours a day, maybe that eight hours a day, every day, will help. So yeah, definitely."

Quantitative Results

The descriptive statistical analysis of data collected via the pre- and post-intervention surveys is summarized below in Table 9, in order to sufficiently answer RQ 3. Specifically, the researcher analyzed data surrounding the three sub-constructs associated with the overarching construct "attitude" from the FPTRQ, specifically in terms of participants openness to engage with families whose children are at risk after participating in the intervention: teacher commitment to working with families (COM), teacher openness to changing their practices with children as a result of the parent/teacher relationship (OPEN), and teacher respect towards families and their values when it comes to child-rearing (RES). This quantitative analysis allowed the researcher to examine the "to what extent" component of third question that guided this study. The researcher examined participant responses associated with each construct both before (T1) and after (T2) participation in the intervention, and reported mean (M) data, standard deviation (SD) and minimum and maximum (Min/Max) scored for each scale.

Table 9. *Descriptive Statistics for FPTRQ based on participant responses*.

Sub-Construct	Scale	M	SD	Min/Max
Commitment to working with families	COMT1 (n=8)	3.40	0.43	2.75/4.00
	COMT2 (n=7)	3.46	0.44	2.75/4.00
Openness to change	OPENT1 (n=8)	3.45	0.47	2.88/4.00
	OPENT2 (n=7)	3.59	0.17	3.38/3.88
Respect for family values	REST1 (n=8)	2.44	0.48	1.75/3.25
	REST2 (n=7)	2.57	0.69	1.50/3.50

Several patterns emerged as a result of the descriptive statistical analysis outlined in the above table. Both of the outcomes for subconstructs "commitment to families" and "openness to change" revealed that participants had favorable attitudes towards those components of their relationships with caregivers of children in their classrooms. However, in terms of "respect for family values", the participant mean scores were lower at 2.44 and 2.57, indicating that participants more often disagreed with how parents discipline their children and run their household from the vantage point of their respect for those parents. Overall, participant mean scores for all three subconstructs increased, and although not in a statistically significant manner, the resulting data did shift in a favorable direction.

An inferential statistical analysis was conducted in order to test whether the pre-intervention and post-intervention participant mean responses were equal or statistically significant based on participation in the intervention. Table 10 displays the inferential statistical analysis outcomes that resulted from a paired samples t-test, which is a statistical examination of one unit or group of participant responses at two different points in time. One of the participants left her position prior to the post-intervention, so data from the inferential analysis is based on n=7 participant responses, and therefore means and standard deviations shifted based on the sub-constructs.

Table 10. *Paired samples t-test results*.

Paired Sample	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed) p value
COMT1 COMT2	3.38 3.46	0.47 0.44	.519	6	.62
OPENT1 OPENT2	3.48 3.59	0.50 0.17	.462	6	.66
REST1 REST2	2.46 2.57	0.51 0.69	.386	6	.71

Note. N=7
*p < .05

As outlined above, the subconstructs that compose the overarching construct of "attitude" on the FPTRQ survey tool are (a) commitment to working with families (COM), (b) openness to change (OPEN) and (c) respect for family values. The paired samples t-tests that were conducted revealed that all three constructs had *p* values greater than .05, indicating that the findings were insignificant. Specifically, the changes in

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participant response scores could have likely been to due chance rather than due to participation in the intervention.

Assumption violations. It is important to note that quantitative researchers have outlined several assumption violations over the years regarding the t-test, several of which are vital to consider in this data analysis (Giulford, 1965; Ferguson, 1966; Hayes, 1963). The underlying assumptions of the t-test are: (a) additivity and linearity (b) normality of something or other, (c) homogeneity of variance, and (d) independence (Field, 2013). Havlicek and Peterson (1974), in their examination of the t-test assumptions, suggest that "in those instances in which the researcher has reasons to suspect that any of the necessary assumptions are violated, he must decide whether to go ahead with the parametric test, to resort to a less powerful distribution-free statistical test, or to use data transformation. A number of limitations, however, have been noted in regard to the second and third alternatives." (p. 1096). As such, the researcher chose to do a paired-samples t-test, and the violations of the assumptions discussed above are outlined in the following paragraph.

First, the assumption of additivity and linearity suggests that the outcome variable is "linearly related to any predictors" (Field, 2013, p. 166), and that if you have several predictors, their combined effect is best described by adding the effects together. This assumption was violated in this action research project, because the researcher did not combine the effects of other predictors and solely looked at the intervention's influence. The second assumption- normally distributed something or other- posits that researchers, in conducting a t-test, must assume that the data is normally distributed (Field, 2013). This assumption was also violated due to the small sample size of the study. The third

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assumption- homogeneity of variance- assumes that each of the samples both pre- and post- intervention come from populations of the same variance (Field, 2013). Due to the small sample size utilized in this study and the heterogeneity of variance of scores, this assumption was violated. The final assumption suggests that participant scores were independent of each other (Field, 2013), indicating that individual responses were untainted by another participant's responses. Although the researcher was not able to observe the participants taking the pre- and post- survey, it is likely that this assumption was maintained.

A comprehensive evaluation of the findings discussed above is provided in the subsequent and final chapter of this action research project.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

"I just feel like it's given me more dedication to put forth full effort in the classroom for that eight to 10 hours a day that I'm with these kiddos and hope that I can educate the parents enough to where it is taken home with them." – Participant interview post-intervention

The purpose of this action research study was to qualitatively and quantitatively examine ECE teacher experiences as they consider the roles that both empathy and culture play in their relationships with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion. Recall that a pragmatic, convergent mixed method design was utilized to efficiently answer the three research questions that aimed to shed light on the problem of preschool expulsion and its corresponding effects later in life, as well as provide a possible solution. A relational cultural communication training (RCCT) served as an intervention strategy designed to assist ECE teachers in their ability to consider their role in caregiver-teacher relationships, specifically in terms of their abilities to be both empathetic and culturally sensitive/aware while communicating with caregivers.

The researcher provided the intervention training to the participants over the course of the fall semester of 2019, and gathered pre-and post-data from three specific sources: interviews, journals, and an evidence-based survey instrument. The systematic analysis conducted on participant responses rendered meaningful findings that are worth considering when it comes to teacher-caregiver relationships in ECE and how they may support child wellness and reduce expulsion. This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of these findings, limitations, implications for future research, implications for practice, and personal lessons learned as a result of completing this project.

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Discussion of Findings

The complex problem of preschool expulsion and its corresponding effects later on in life has been examined closely over the last fifteen years by several researchers and theorists hoping to remedy the pervasive issue (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Shivers, 2015; Perry et al., 2011). Although much effort has been put forth thus far that has indicated early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) is the most-evidence based and efficacious intervention for preschool expulsion, young children are still being suspended and/or expelled from ECE programs consistently. Therefore, the researcher of this action research study identified a gap in the literature that she sought to examine- the teacher-caregiver relationship and its impact on expulsion- and formulated a relational cultural communication training (RCCT) aimed at increasing teacher empathy and cultural sensitivity/awareness when it comes to engaging in these important relationships with children's caregivers. The following sub-sections reveal important findings based on each RQ that guided the study, and linked them to current literature and theory so that future research can be informed.

Research Question One- The role of culture in teacher-caregiver relationships. The researcher, in order to provide ECE teachers with a robust voice in the literature in terms of their experiences when it comes to working with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, chose to frame this question qualitatively, with triangulation of both pre-interviews and journal entries. Recall that the combination of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory (BST) and Baker Miller's (1976) relational cultural theory (RCT) served as a foundational frame for this research project, and the analysis of the qualitative data sources rendered constructs and themes that

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aligned appropriately with both frameworks as well as other literature sources share the same ideas.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory that a child's development is influenced by the mesosystemic relationship between home and school, this action research project similarly suggested that participants felt that the stronger the relationship they had with parents/caregivers, the better that children would fare both within the ECE program in which they were enrolled as well as in their future. The findings also reinforced Bronfenbrenner's concept that he coined "proximal processes", suggesting that teacher-caregiver interactions are correlated with positive outcomes most often when environments are consistent, stable, and advantageous. Qualitatively, both of these concepts arose in the comprehensive analysis conducted on the interviews and journals as critical components to a child's success in ECE from the vantage point of a teacher.

The construct "culture" was utilized by this researcher as a function of the critical component of relational cultural theory (RCT), a feminist theory often used to frame clinician-client relationships in the realm of mental health (Baker-Miller, 1976). However, due to the nature of ECMHC and its sizeable focus on the power of relationships as mechanisms for healing, the researcher chose to situate this study's intervention using the same concepts. Recall that the critical role that culture plays in an individual's ability to emotionally connect with another has been outlined comprehensively in RCT. Interestingly, participant responses to RQ 1 aligned consistently with the concepts that Baker-Miller suggests are associated with disconnection within relationships based on cultural disparities, and ultimately negative outcomes. Specifically, participants spoke to the fact that they felt more connected to

those caregivers that shared similar backgrounds and experiences as their own. Participants also discussed the manner in which negative interaction patterns lead to isolation and blame, which is represented in RCT as the central relational paradox.

Recall that RCT supports the multicultural/social justice paradigm by placing emphasis on the fact that institutionalized forms of oppression that exist at the societal level are often experienced in the context of interpersonal relationships, and that neglecting to consider the influence of culture on relationships reinforces the silence that often accompanies the subject (Comstock et al., 2008). Aligning with this social justice paradigm, the findings associated with RQ 1 of this study reinforced the prior literature on implicit bias, multigenerational trauma, and cultural differences that often lead to disconnection among individuals (Baker-Miller, 1986; Gilliam et al., 2016). The concept of disconnection was threaded throughout the interviews and journals as a result of cultural differences, bias, history of abuse and lack of sensitivity when it came to both the teachers' interactions and the caregivers' responses. Similar results have been profusely apparent in the recent literature exploring the roles that culture and implicit bias play across several fields of work, ranging from law enforcement (Nix, Campbell, Byers & Alpert, 2017; Fridel, 2016) to medicine (Chapman, Kaatz & Carnes, 2013; Sabin & Greenwald, 2012) and even to legal proceedings (Lee, 2015; Salmanowitz, 2016).

Recall from previous chapters that RQ 1 was posed to answer the question "What role do ECE teachers' perceive that culture plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?" The data analysis that was conducted to sufficiently answer the question confirmed that (a) teachers felt that cultural/background differences negatively influence their communication with caregivers and ultimately

adversely affect child outcomes, (b) cultural/background similarities positively influence

their communication with caregivers and ultimately favorably inform child outcomes,

and (c) implicit and explicit biases both play roles in a teacher's engagement with

caregivers whose child is at-risk for expulsion.

Research Question Two- The role of empathy in teacher-caregiver

relationships. The second research question that steered this action research study sought

to explore ECE teacher viewpoints on the role that empathy plays in their work with

families whose children are at-risk for expulsion. The researcher, using the same method

as RQ 1, collected and analyzed qualitative data (pre-interviews and journal entries) in

order to provide a thick description of teacher perspectives on the topic of empathy

within those relationships. Recall that empathy is defined by relational cultural theorists

as

> ...the affective-cognitive experience of understanding another person...[It] carries
>
> with it some notion of motivation to understand another's meaning system from
>
> his/her frame of reference and ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of
>
> the other (Jordan, 1985, p. 2).

Qualitative results revealed several themes that are consistent with the overarching

framework discussed above, that included both BST and RCT concepts concerning

empathy. Consistent with the notion of the power of connection, participants spoke to the

fact that they felt an increase in empathy for caregivers the more often they

communicated with them. Aligned with RCT, participants discussed their perspectives

that having connections with caregivers allowed for an increased understanding of the

children in their classrooms, which ultimately led to improved child functioning and less

challenging behavior. Further, participants shared that a caregiver's approach to communication often influenced their relationships with all parties involved in the ECE setting (the child, the caregiver, etc.).

On the contrary, participants also spoke to having a "lack of empathy" for certain caregivers, particularly due to having negative interactions with them about their children. As a result, the ECE teachers that participated in the study discussed how the consequential disconnection that arises from these negative interactions can negatively impact a child and, at times, lead to disenrollment. Recall that disconnection, relational cultural theorists warn (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997), results in a "pervasive lack of interpersonal connection and sense of isolation leading to distress," (Frey, 2013, p. 178), which leads to growth-inhibition and relational conflict that can persist and habitually rupture relationships. Participants, consistent with the notion outlined above, noted that experiencing negative interaction factors from a caregiver such as defensiveness and blaming resulted in relational conflict, and ultimately made it more difficult to have empathy for that caregiver.

Prior literature that has utilized BST as a normative framework for child development has confirmed that the relationship between the home system and the school system is vital for a child's success (Lang et al., 2015; Leonard, 2011; Paat, 2013; Yan & Asnari, 2017). Results from this action research project were consistent with the idea that the relational health of the teacher-caregiver dyad (mesosystem) is critical, and that empathy for a child's caregiver is an influential ingredient in the overall trajectory of a young child spending most of their day in an ECE program.

Interestingly, participant definitions of the word "empathy" varied significantly, and teachers often used the word "sympathy" in their descriptions. In inferring from the qualitative data, it appeared that teachers had some awareness of the concept of empathy, however struggled to differentiate it from other forms of emotional support or relational concepts. Although participants had worked with an early childhood mental health consultant in the past, the concept of empathy seemingly had a loose definition and was notably challenging to truly teach to someone. The lack of understanding that was expressed in the qualitative data supported the need for this action research project and relational cultural intervention.

Research Question Three- The influence of the RCCT intervention on teacher attitudes concerning empathy and cultural sensitivity. The final question that was posed in this action research project was mixed method in nature, as it examined the influence of the RCCT intervention on teacher attitudes towards engaging in relationships with families and caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion. Both qualitative and quantitative data sources were analyzed in order to integrate and cross-validate findings, with the hope of identifying complementarity across the results. The following findings were complementary in nature and ultimately strengthened the information that resulted from this action research project.

Examination of the qualitative and quantitative findings as a whole revealed that teacher attitudes- specifically, teacher openness, respect for families, and commitment- when it comes to implementing cultural sensitivity and empathy into their practice with caregivers *shifted in a favorable direction.* Although none of the shifts in the quantitative data were statistically significant, the results revealed that participation in the intervention

did positively influence teacher perspectives on engaging with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion. For example, the shift that was most likely to have occurred due to participation in the intervention out of the three sub-constructs was participant commitment to working with families (p= .62), followed by openness to changing practices (p= .66), and then respect for families' values (p= .71). Qualitative findings corroborated these changes as a result of the analysis of both participant interviews and journal entries. Specifically, participants spoke to the changes in their attitudes when it came to readiness to engage with families, describing their desire to (a) decrease their blaming, (b) increase their shared accountability for the children, and (c) increase their communication with families more overall after participation in the intervention training.

Qualitatively, participants expressed their perspectives that participation in the intervention training changed the way in which they view communication with families and increased their awareness as to both the roles empathy and cultural sensitivity play in their relationships with families. Participants felt that the training informed their practices both with the children in their classrooms and with the caregivers, as it shed considerable light on the importance in being self-aware, vulnerable and mutually empathic, which is consistent with the literature in the field of mental health that is framed by RCT (Duffy & Somody, 2011; Tricknor & Averett, 2017; Liang et al., 2002). Further, in alignment with the social justice component of RCT, participants illuminated the idea that cultural and background differences often lead to disconnection between them and a caregiver, which further exacerbates the stratification that persists in society today and reinforces the oppression that occurs particularly when it comes to minority young boys in ECE

programs across the country (Cass & Curry, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Baker-Miller & Stiver, 1997).

The quantitative data that was analyzed for this final research question revealed that the intervention favorably shifted participant responses slightly across all three subconstructs that fell under the "attitude" construct on the provider/teacher measure of the FPTRQ (Kim et al., 2015). However, the subconstruct that had the least significant change was "respect for families' values", which indicated that participants felt that the training influenced this component of teacher-family relationships the least. Due to the fact that the FPTRQ has rarely "been used for program monitoring, evaluation, or professional development", this finding might suggest further evaluation of the tool is warranted in terms of its efficacy and effectiveness across contexts (Kim et al., 2015). Overall, participant mean scores obtained from both the pre- and post- surveys were mostly favorable and fell within the 3-4 range on the scales associated with each item. These findings indicate that true change in teacher practices when it comes to communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion likely necessitate *more than just a positive attitude* towards empathy and cultural sensitivity, as teachers were favorable about the concepts both before and after the intervention.

Limitations

Although the process of conducting action research is finely established (Creswell, 2014), there are internal and external factors that can influence outcomes and ultimately become limitations of any particular project. As such, limitations of any research study should be examined and considered, in order to strengthen future research on the topic or problem of practice at hand. This current section discusses the limitations

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of the current study on preschool expulsion and the proposed intervention centered on teacher-caregiver relationships that was created as a possible solution.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this action research project is the sample size of teachers participating in the study. The small sample size limited the researcher's ability to accurately determine reliability and validity of the instruments involved, as well as limited the study's ability to be generalized to other populations or contexts. Further, the sample size proved to be limiting in that one of the participants left the ECE program prior to completion of the project (attrition), and some participants were unable to complete all survey items, resulting in some discrepancies within the quantitative component of this study.

Another limitation to consider is the sampling strategy that the researcher utilized, as it was purposive in nature (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, the researcher purposively identified the preschool that served as the setting of this project, and then purposively identified participants based on availability, commitment to the project, and eager to participate; as such, there likely were preexisting moderating variables that shaped the results. Consequently, the findings might be skewed in a favorable direction due to (a) convenience, (b) the openness of the specific teachers involved, and (c) the director's commitment to improving ECE programs/his decision to permit the researcher to utilize his preschool as the setting for this study.

A unique limitation of the methodology of this study was the fact that the researcher works as a mental health clinician, which inherently influenced her ability to remain neutral as a researcher. The researcher had challenges maintaining her role as participants became vulnerable during both the intervention as well as the interviews. As

a result, interview conversations were likely less structured and varied across participants more so than more neutral interview conversations. The researcher also has a skill set that allowed for more empathic and mindful delivery of the interviews, the intervention and the discussions, which could have certainly informed the manner in which the information was received in comparison to a neutral researcher's delivery.

Contextual action research studies must consider the potential for the Hawthorne effect as a limitation to a study (Smith & Glass, 1987), as researchers are collecting data within their own work setting. Consequently, the researcher wears several hats while gathering data, which ultimately leads to an ambiguous relationship between researcher and participant. As a result, participants could have modified their behavior or responses to questions based on the fact that they were being observed and interviewed by the researcher, leading to skewed data. In order to mitigate this limitation, the researcher chose a preschool that she did not have a preexisting consultative relationship with, so that the teachers were less likely to feel the need to validate the researcher's ultimate aim. However, literature across contexts has confirmed that the Hawthorne effect is often always a limitation to a study regardless of provisions taken (Smith & Glass, 1987).

Kim et al. (2015), the creators of the Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality tool (FPTRQ) that the researcher utilized to answer RQ 3, suggested that the instrument itself had limitations that could inform any study that uses it as a data source. Specifically, they discussed that the instrument (a) has yet to be utilized for evaluation or professional development, (b) has never been validated to examine the relationship between relational quality and outcomes, and (c) has yet to explore cultural sensitivity as a factor that might influence these relationships. The researcher included culture as a

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construct in this study to perhaps inform future interactions of the FPTRQ, as qualitative results showed that culture certainly informs teacher-caregiver relationships and corresponding child outcomes.

A final limitation of this action research project was the amount of time allotted to conduct such a rigorous study, as it restricted much of the methodology and the breadth of the intervention itself. Early childhood mental health consultation is an evidence-based intervention for preschool expulsion that the researcher attempted to emulate in providing the RCCT. However, ECMHC encourages relationships with preschools that last one to two years, so that trust can be developed, teachers become more confident, and ultimately children fare better. The time limitation associated with this project limited its ability to fully emulate a process associated with ECMHC. However, the researcher hopes that, as a result of this paper, ECMHC programs across the nation begin to recognize the incredible need to better train ECE teachers on how to engage with families as a function of creating resiliency, which will ultimately influence expulsion rates.

Implications for Practice

Education has and will continue to serve as an integral component of the functioning of the world, and because of the extensive and complex role it holds within society, will forever be riddled with wicked problems (Jordan, Kleinsasser & Roe, 2014). Early childhood education, which served as the context that catalyzed this particular action research project, is unfortunately affected by the same problems that define and reinforce the preschool to prison pipeline that adversely affects thousands of individuals every day (Cass & Curry, 2007). As a result of several years of recent literature on preschool expulsion and its corresponding outcomes for individuals later in life, several

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interventions have been created, yet ECMHC has continued to be the golden standard of change (Child Trends, 2016; Shivers, 2015; Gilliam, 2007). However, gaps in the literature still exist, and children continue to be expelled. Therefore, the researcher of this current study sought to examine and remedy the problem of preschool expulsion from a specific port of entry: the teacher-caregiver relationship.

Findings that resulted from this study can inform the practice of ECE directors, teachers, early childhood mental health consultants, and nonprofit organizations that house consultation programs alike. First and foremost, the intervention was tailored to support ECE teachers in their endeavors to engage thoughtfully with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion, keeping empathy and cultural sensitivity in mind, and both qualitative and quantitative analysis revealed that the training supported this shift. Therefore, it is evident that teachers benefitted from training about both empathy and culture as it pertains to their relationships with caregivers whose children are exhibiting challenging behaviors. This project illuminates the fact that ECE teachers do not receive enough training or education on relational skills that are necessary to fully support the social and emotional wellness of children under the age of five. The study also clarified the fact that opportunity for reflection and discussion with peers and time to have meaningful conversation with caregivers are necessary for a child's success. In a global sense, an increase in teacher understanding of how to communicate and connect with families will only support the overall outcomes of children not only in ECE, but in K-12 and beyond.

Second, directors and owners of ECE programs can utilize this study to inform the manner in which they approach disciplinary measures, support their teachers, and

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enhance the overall wellness of their programs. This study added to the literature on preschool expulsion, and specifically provided an intervention aimed at lessening these punitive measures for the betterment of society as a whole. Directors can take the information from this study and justify the need for their teachers to have more professional development on both challenging behaviors and relational capacity with families, more time for breaks throughout the day to support teachers' emotional regulation, and more opportunity for connection with caregivers.

The practice of early childhood mental health consultation throughout the country can utilize the findings of this study to inform the way they each approach the discipline, particularly in terms of both providing professional development to teachers as well as doing individual teacher consultation. Including the RCCT intervention in the pool of trainings that consultants can offer to sites could positively impact a teacher's ability to connect with and have empathy for a caregiver whose child is at risk for expulsion. Similarly, consultants could participate in the training themselves, in order to reflect on their own biases, become more attuned to their own empathic responses, and recognize the integral role that they have in modeling connection for teachers.

It is apparent that these changes in practice will require larger social contexts- and the stakeholders within them- to become involved in the solution. Preschool expulsion has a rippling effect in society, and influences the realms of education, mental health, social justice, the legal system, the justice system, and even medicine as a child exposed to the corrective measure develops and becomes an adult. As such, policy makers at local, state and national levels must begin to pay attention to any and all possible solutions that researchers and clinicians are creating to remedy the problem at-hand, and

would benefit from latching onto the strong narrative about early intervention and its favorable outcomes rather than tend to social issues as they arise later in a child's life.

Implications for Research

Although the findings of this action research study hold some significance, they also reveal the need for much more literature on the topic of preschool expulsion and the function of the teacher-caregiver relationship as a form of intervention. Specifically, the results suggest three main areas of future research: (a) further exploration of teacher experiences when it comes to their relationships with families whose children are at risk, (b) further exploration of the role that teacher experiences in childhood have on their desire to be ECE caregivers, and (c) initial exploration of the RCCT intervention with a parent/caregiver population rather than teacher population.

The results of this study, albeit comprehensive, reveal that there is much more qualitative work needing to be done in order to better understand teacher experiences as they work with families. The researcher, in evaluating her research design, realized after completion of this project that the intervention itself was perhaps prematurely created and implemented, likely due to the fact that teacher experiences need to be further heard and exposed in the literature in order for researchers to recognize what teachers need. As such, the next cycle of research that the researcher might conduct would involve gathering an even more robust amount of qualitative data (e.g. through interviews, observations, journals, field notes, etc.) to further define the problem of expulsion and teacher/caregiver relationships from the *teachers' lenses* rather than basing an intervention on a preexisting theory.

An interesting category of data that arose from the qualitative analysis stemmed from the conversations that centered on teacher background experiences and culture. The researcher identified that every teacher involved in the study had experienced some sort of adverse childhood experience- ranging from having a parent in prison, to being in foster care, to being abused, to having an alcoholic parent in the home, to even being a product of a teenage pregnancy. Therefore, the researcher identified that when teachers heard the word "culture" or "upbringing", they all shared about negative experiences they had as a child, rather than positive ones. The researcher, in a more global sense, wonders about the relationship between ECE teachers and the number of adverse childhood experiences, and ultimately would like to explore the "why" behind an ECE teacher's decision to enter the field of caregiving with a history of not-so-healthy caregiving themselves. Ultimately, the researcher would like to gather survey data using the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study tool (ACES) to gather descriptive data of ECE teacher ACE scores at local, state, and even national levels (CDC- Kaiser, 1997).

The final area of research that the researcher would like to explore in the future involves examining the RCCT intervention and exploring the experiences of *parents/caregivers* of children at-risk for expulsion as they engage with ECE teachers who are caring for their children throughout the day. Because the intervention involves discussing the power of relationships and connection, the study was limiting in that it only had one component of the dyadic system as a pool of participants. Future cycles of research could gather teacher *and* parent experiences, and could then be utilized to craft interventions tailored to meet both parties' needs when it comes to promoting healthy, empathic relationships in ECE programs.

Personal Lessons Learned

Engaging in this action research process has exponentially influenced me both as a researcher and a practitioner. One of my committee members suggested that I read some resources on the influence that my own subjectivity has had on my overall experience, and I found it incredibly helpful to examine the lessons I have learned through this meaningful lens. Alan Peshkin, in his piece *In Search of Subjectivity- One's Own* (1988), explains his process of recognizing the several "I's" that come into play as he conducts research, and how important it is to consider how these subjective lenses are influential in the shaping of- and outcomes- any research project.

Interestingly enough, I utilized the third person in this paper, as I felt it was a more formal way of communicating my research. However, in reflecting on the lessons I have learned, it likely would have illuminated my subjectivity a bit more had I shared my ideas using "I". After the rigorous challenges that came with completing this study, I have learned as I sit writing this final section that my subjectivity as a researcher and practitioner is not something that needs to be hidden behind "the researcher". In fact, as I received feedback from my committee during my final defense, I realized just how important my role has been, and that the unique nature of who I am as both a researcher and a mental health clinician should be celebrated as much as they have been critiqued (by myself, mostly!).

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned throughout this journey is to not minimize the subjective role I had as a mental health consultant implementing this intervention. I wrote about the limitations of this throughout my paper, when in reality- why was I doing that? Research can be just as useful to a reader when the skill sets and

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character of the researcher shine through the words as much as the science does. Another piece of feedback I received during my defense suggested that I actually divulge more about myself as the *person* conducting this study, not the researcher conducting this study. Reflecting on that feedback, I can absolutely see the value in knowing who is behind the words, rather than neglecting that factor and simply reading the project as one would read any other piece of literature.

The last- and perhaps greatest personal lesson I learned in this process- is that identifying a problem of practice and honing in on one possible solution is beyond difficult. It took me three years to write this paper, and to this day still feel there are gaps that must be filled, other ways to manage this dilemma, and so much left out there that is undiscovered in the field of early childhood. As much as that makes me feel like the splash I made is minimal, it also illuminates the fact that research and practice have a long way to go, which is very exciting to me. Although I have moved on and am now spinning my wheels about how to improve child outcomes from the vantage point of pediatric cancer, I will never forget the peaks and valleys that have shaped me over the last few years, both as a student, a researcher, and a practitioner. I hope to expand on this work in the near future.

Conclusion

The context of education in its entirety serves several functions in the world today, and provides humanity with both benefits and hardships that must be tended to at an academic level, a practical level, and at a policy level. Fortunately and unfortunately, researchers over the last several decades have shed considerable light on education and its idiosyncrasies, in hopes of bettering the complex nature of what it means to "educate"

and "be educated". Research has focused heavily on K-12 education and higher education over the last several years, however recently has started to center in on the powerful years that occur before kindergarten and how pivotal they are in terms of outcomes later in life: zero to five. The researcher of this current study has spent most of her mental health career working closely with this population as well as those who care for them on a daily basis. When the researcher entered the world of Early Care and Education as a mental health consultant, her entire worldview shifted, and the pervasive issues that she was exposed to served as catalysts for her entry into this doctoral program.

Preschool expulsion. Those words situated next to each other often shock people in discussion about the researcher's role as a consultant. "What do young children get expelled from preschool for?!" is a common reaction to those two words. Learning about the literature that Walter Gilliam initiated that has since evolved over the last fifteen years encouraged the researcher to explore this complex problem from an action research standpoint. The researcher found a gap in the literature that seemed worthwhile to explore, because albeit the tremendous work that has been done over the years to mitigate the issue, children continue to get expelled: the teacher/caregiver relationship.

Although findings of this study are limited on just how important the teacher-caregiver relationship can be as a function of lessening expulsions, they provide some insight into the direction that future research needs to move. There are several ports of entry for all social problems that riddle our society today, and it is critical that researchers and practitioners alike continue to explore and find ways to manage the dilemmas that define humanity's multifaceted context.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- FIRST PHASE

Thanks for meeting with me today. My name is Caitlin Meaney and as you are probably aware, I'm conducting research on early care and education (ECE) teachers' experiences when it comes to communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion from their ECE program. The purpose of our meeting today is to engage in a verbal interview on the above-mentioned topic.

With your permission, I would like to audio record this interview. Do you consent to having this interview recorded?

This interview will likely take 20-30 minutes. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability, and as honestly as possible. You do not have to answer all the questions. Please let me know if you wish to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introductory Questions

1. What is your current role at the preschool?
2. How long have you been working in ECE?
3. How does your school approach discipline with young children?
4. What do you consider to be a negative behavior?
5. What, if any, experience have you had in working with families and caregivers whose children are at risk for expulsion?
6. How do you typically approach a caregiver when it comes to their child and their negative behavior?
7. Are there topics that are more difficult to talk about when it comes to a child and challenges they are having in the classroom? Please explain.
8. Are there topics that are easier to talk about when it comes to a child and challenges they are having in the classroom? Please explain.
9. What emotions do you experience when you imagine having conversations with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion?
10. What thoughts come to your mind when you imagine having conversations with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion?

RQ 1: What role do ECE teachers' perceive that culture plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

11. Tell me a little bit about your upbringing. What was it like growing up in your home? In your neighborhood?
12. What comes to mind when you hear the word "culture", specifically in your role as an ECE teacher that communicates with caregivers?
13. How do you feel culture influences a person's ability to connect with others?
14. Do you feel culture plays a role in disconnection between two people?
15. What influence do you feel that your own culture has on your ability to communicate with caregivers?

16. Can you provide some examples of experiences you have had with caregivers where your culture and/or your student's culture played a role in your relationships?
17. What influence do you feel that the family's culture has on your ability to communicate with caregivers whose children are at risk?
18. How might culture support communication between you and a caregiver? How might culture inhibit communication between you and a caregiver?

RQ 2: What role do ECE teachers' perceive that empathy plays in their communication with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

19. How do you define the word "empathy"?
20. How did you learn about empathy?
21. What experiences in your life taught you about empathy?
22. What does empathy look like in your daily work as an ECE teacher?
23. In thinking about communicating with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, who comes to your mind that is being affected by these challenges?
24. What comes to mind when you hear the word "empathy", specifically in your role as an ECE teacher that communicates with caregivers?
25. What role do you feel empathy plays a role in your work with families? Please explain.
26. What do you perceive might be easy or difficult for you in this process?
27. What do you perceive might be easy or difficult for the caregiver in this process?
28. Do you feel that you affect caregivers as you communicate with them?
29. Do you feel affected by caregivers as they communicate with you?

APPENDIX B

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROTOCOL

Thanks for meeting with me today. My name is Caitlin Meaney and as you are probably aware, I'm conducting research on early care and education (ECE) teachers' experiences when it comes to communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion from their ECE program. The following document provides information to you on the reflective journaling component of this action research study.

I will be providing each of you with a new notebook during our meeting today to utilize as your journal for the next three months. Please feel free to use this journal whenever you feel appropriate and document your experiences working with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion. You may also document your experiences working with caregivers in general. Please aim to answer one journal prompt every ~two weeks throughout the next three months.

Provided below are eight journal prompts that are designed to gather more specific data on your experiences. You are not limited to writing solely in response to the prompts; you may document on any experience. The journal entries can be completed at any point during the data collection window. I will collect your journals before the holidays in December. There are no right or wrong answers or ways to journal your experiences; and your participation is voluntary. If you wish to discontinue journaling at any point, you are free to do so.

Journal Prompts
1. Describe a positive experience you had communicating with a caregiver whose child is at-risk. Share about your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, as well as the caregiver's possible thoughts, feelings and behaviors.
2. Describe a negative experience you had communicating with a caregiver whose child is at-risk. Share about your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, as well as the caregiver's possible thoughts, feelings and behaviors.
3. Describe a time that you felt culture influenced your communication with a caregiver whose child is at-risk, both positively and negatively.
4. Describe a time that you felt empathy influenced your communication with a caregiver whose child is at-risk, both positively and negatively.
5. Describe the two main take-aways you had after participating in the training modules.

6. Describe how this training influenced your ability to empathize with caregivers whose children are at risk for expulsion.
7. Describe how this training influenced your ability to consider culture in communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion.
8. How did this training influence you as a teacher? Did it change you in any way?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- SECOND PHASE

Thanks for meeting with me today. My name is Caitlin Meaney and as you are probably aware, I'm conducting research on early care and education (ECE) teachers' experiences when it comes to communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion from their ECE program. The purpose of our meeting today is to engage in a verbal interview on the above- mentioned topic post-participation in the intervention.

With your permission, I would like to audio record this interview. Do you consent to having this interview recorded?

This interview will likely take 20-30 minutes. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability, and as honestly as possible. You do not have to answer all the questions. Please let me know if you wish to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

RQ 3. How and to what extent does participation in a Relational Cultural Communication training (RCCT), designed to help ECE teachers recognize the roles that both empathy and culture play in their communication with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, influence teacher attitudes towards building relationships with families?

1. How has participation in the intervention influenced your attitude towards interacting with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion?

2. From your perspective, what are the benefits of being cognizant of culture and empathy when interacting with families whose children are at risk for expulsion? What are the limitations?

3. How has participation in the intervention influenced your openness to changing your practices when it comes to working with children and their families who are at risk for expulsion?

4. How has participation in the intervention influenced your commitment to working with families whose children are at risk for expulsion?

5. How has participation in the intervention influenced your ability to see these interactions with families whose children are at risk for expulsion in terms of your respect for these relationships?

6. After participation in the relational cultural intervention…What influence do you feel that your own culture has on your ability to communicate with caregivers whose children are at risk?

7. After participation in the relational cultural intervention…What influence do you feel that the family's culture has on your ability to communicate with caregivers whose children are at risk?

8. After participation in the relational cultural intervention…How might culture support communication between you and a caregiver?

9. After participation in the relational cultural intervention…How might culture inhibit communication between you and a caregiver?
10. After participation in a relational cultural intervention… In thinking about communicating with families whose children are at-risk for expulsion, who comes to your mind that is being affected by these challenges?
11. After participation in a relational cultural intervention… What comes to mind when you hear the word "empathy", specifically in your role as an ECE teacher that communicates with caregivers?
12. After participation in a relational cultural intervention… What role do you feel empathy plays a role in your work with families? Please explain.
13. After participation in a relational cultural intervention… What do you perceive might be easy or difficult for you in this process?
14. After participation in a relational cultural intervention… What do you perceive might be easy or difficult for the caregiver in this process?

15. After participation in a relational cultural intervention…Do you feel that you affect caregivers as you communicate with them?
16. After participation in a relational cultural intervention…Do you feel affected by caregivers as they communicate with you?

APPENDIX D

SURVEY PROTOCOL

Dear Study Participant,

We are asking you to complete this 16-question survey prior to your participation in the Relational Cultural Communication Training (RCCT). The survey will ask for your insight concerning your attitude towards communicating and building relationships with caregivers whose children are at risk for expulsion. The survey items come from the Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Project, specifically the provider/teacher measure (Kim et al., 2015). We anticipate this questionnaire will take no longer than 5-10 minutes. As noted, in your informed consent, you will complete the same survey at end of the RCCT. The link to the post-survey will be provided to you at the end of the third training module. Your responses will be kept confidential. Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications.

Thank you,
Caitlin Meaney Doctoral Student
Dr. Ying-Chih Chen, Assistant Professor and Dissertation Committee Chair

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact a member of the research team: Dr. Ying-Chin Chen at ychen495@asu.edu or (480) 965-9612 or Caitlin Meaney at cmeaney@asu.edu or (520) 240-7393. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

Part 1
Directions: This survey is divided into five parts. Part 1 will ask you to complete some basic demographic information. This data is being collected for the purpose of describing the sample of the participants in this study. In addition, you will also create a unique identifier. This identifier consists of using the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your cell phone number. For example, "Sar 4567" would be the identifier for someone whose mother's first name is Sarah, and whose own phone number is (602) 543-4567. The accuracy of this data is important as your Post-Survey responses will be matched accordingly, along with your interview and journal entries.

Demographics
Gender: M / F / prefer not to answer
Age: _____
Years working in ECE: _____
Your unique identifier: _____

Part 2
Directions: Part 2 will ask you respond to 4 statements using the following scale to indicate your level of agreement with the statement as it pertains to your commitment to working with families.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Commitment to working with families

- I teach and care for children because I enjoy it.

- I see this job just as a paycheck.

- I teach and care for children because I like being around children.

- If I could find something else to do to make a living I would.

Part 3
Directions: Part 3 will ask you respond to six questions using the following scale to indicate your openness to change in communicating with caregivers whose children are at-risk for expulsion.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Openness to change

- I am open to using information on new and better ways to teach and care for children.

- I encourage parents to provide feedback on my care and teaching practices.

- I encourage parents to make decisions about their children's education and care.

- Even though my professional or moral viewpoints may differ, I accept that parents are the ultimate decision makers for the care and education of their children.

- Part of my job is to learn new ways to teach and care for children.

- Part of my job is to change activities offered to children in response to families' feedback.

Part 4
Directions: Part 4 will ask you respond to two questions using the following scale to indicate the likelihood you would consider the following when planning activities for children.

Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
4	3	2	1

Openness to change

- Information parents share about their children.

- Families' values and cultures.

Part 5
Directions: Part 5 will ask you respond to four questions using the following scale to indicate your level of agreement with the statement as it pertains to your understanding of families' culture with whom you work.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Respect
- Sometimes it is hard for me to support the way parents raise their children.

- Sometimes it is hard for me to support the way parents discipline their children.

- Sometimes it is hard for me to support the goals parents have for their children.

- Sometimes it is hard for me to work with parents who do not share my beliefs.

Thank you for you completing this survey.

Reference: Kim, K., Porter, T., Atkinson, V., Rui, N., Ramos, M., Brown, E., Guzman, L., Forry, N., and Nord, C. (2015). *Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Measures: Updated User's Manual.* OPRE Report 2014-65. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

APPENDIX E

OPEN CODE FREQUENCIES

Code	Total
acceptance	1
age specific	7
anxiety	1
approach to discipline	17
arguing	1
attachment	2
attention seeking	1
attribution	12
autism	5
being on the same page	1
bias	1
big family	3
black child	2
blame	7
caregiver	2
challenges in classroom	9
challenges to communication	11
challenging bx	11
change the way we think	2
child background/experiences	6
child development	9
child progress	3
child specific	2
child who gets hurt	1
child with challenging bx	2
child's interest	2
childhood adversity	3
classroom demographics	2
close minded	3
communication	18
communication affects child bx	1
connection	30
consistency	8
cultural differences among children	14
cultural sensitivity	19
culture	20
culture definition	7

culture in classroom	7
culture supporting communication	1
denial	10
developmental behavior	8
developmental delay	1
differences	24
different attitudes	6
different environments	11
different races	6
difficult to have empathy	9
disconnection	39
divorced parents	1
ECE field	1
emotions	13
empathy	45
empathy definition	12
empathy depends on the parent	9
experience	8
expulsion	4
family dynamics influence bx	2
feeling shame/fault	2
getting a child help	1
happy family	1
hard topic	1
head start	2
help other	2
holidays	1
home school practices consistency	6
humbled	2
ignorance	1
inclusion	2
inconsistency	4
knowing parents name	1
knowledge of family/information	3
lack of acceptance	1
lack of empathy	1
learning	1
learning about empathy	9
lost brother	1

made for teaching	1
meditation	1
mental health consultation	1
modeling	2
music	1
narration	1
negative behavior	5
news	1
only able to do so much at school	1
opportunity for communication	7
outside services	2
parent attribution	4
parent communication	17
parent defensiveness	4
parent observing in classroom	1
parent reaction to bx	11
parents allowing communication	3
prepare parents	1
racism	6
redirection	6
relationships with children	2
responses to children	2
routine changes	1
same treatment	1
self regulation	3
setting example	1
several caregivers	1
shove kid into room	6
similar cultures	3
spanish speaking	1
teacher approach to parent communicaation	14
teacher as parent	7
teacher asking questions	3
teacher background and culture	30
teacher belief	24
teacher changing practices	4
teacher child relationship	23
teacher confidence	1
teacher defensiveness	6

teacher education	2
teacher emotional response	34
teacher experience working in ECE	7
teacher experiences in childhood	33
teacher mindfulness	7
teacher parent relationship	59
teacher patience	3
teacher response	20
teacher role	5
teacher seeking help	8
toys in classroom	1
transitions/pick up and dropoff	4
trauma	9
type of communication	11
understanding behavior	10
unsure what empathy means	1
who is affected by behavior	11
years teaching	7

APPENDIX F

IRB APPROVAL

EXEMPTION
GRANTED

Ying-Chih Chen
Division of Teacher Preparation - Tempe
-
Ying-

Chih.Chen@asu.edu

Dear Ying-Chih

Chen:

On 5/14/2019 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Strengthening Relationships among Teachers and Caregivers in Early Care and Education: A Strategy to Prevent Expulsion
Investigator:	Ying-Chih Chen
IRB ID:	STUDY00010181
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None

Documents Reviewed:	• Journal Protocol Meaney.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Interview 2 Meaney.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Letter of Commitment Raising AZ Preschool, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc); • Meaney IRB protocol Dissertation.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Outline of Training, Category: Technical materials/diagrams; • Survey Protocol Meaney.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • IRB Recruitment Consent Form Meaney.pdf, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to
Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation
on 5/14/2019.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the
INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).