Fostering Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education through Leadership and Parental Engagement

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Abstract

“Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.”

— Mother Teresa

This dissertation explores ways in which early childhood education (ECE) leaders interact with parents to facilitate learning through play. It analyses the relationship between leadership practices, expectations of parents, and cultural perceptions of education (Huang, 2013; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Zhang & Yu, 2016). This is achieved by employing a systematic literature review as the methodology. The review is informed by established guidelines for analysis of research literature as well as the PRISMA guidelines for open data collection of literature (Booth et al., 2012; Liberati et al., 2009; Mutch, 2013; Snyder, 2019).

The findings illustrate that although play-based learning is widely acknowledged as a basis for holistic development, numerous parents still doubt its value, especially those from societies that place a high priority on formal academic accomplishment (Huang, 2013). Play is an essential component of education, particularly in early childhood settings. Play-based learning allows children to develop useful information and abilities by reorienting the teaching process from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach (Khalil et al., 2022).

Play-based learning has a substantial impact on children's development in early childhood as well as their advancement in later formal education (Khalil et al., 2022). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory views play as a key activity that fosters emotional, cognitive, and social development by allowing children to experiment with imagined elements and self-directed norms (Vygotsky, 1976).

Joy is evident and frequently connected to early childhood environments and children's play. Even if joy is acknowledged and validated, barriers including administrative duties, regulations, expectations from parents, burnout, and time constraints can prevent educators from fully embracing joyful, play-based pedagogies (Little & Karaolis, 2023).

Some of these barriers may be caused in part by parents' lack of support for their children's play, which is fuelled by high standards and demands for academic success as well as a lack of knowledge about the value of play in children's development (Karuppiah, 2022). Early childhood education leaders are under more pressure to bridge understanding through relational, honest, and culturally sensitive communication because of this tension (Lindsay, 2024; Heikkinen et al., 2024).

This dissertation makes an argument that effective early childhood education leadership is a relational and ethical practice based on Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) values rather than just a collection of administrative skills. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), the early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, has a strong emphasis on connections, family and community, empowerment, and holistic development as key pillars that enable inclusive and culturally sensitive pedagogies.

It is crucial to respect the various realities and goals of early learning communities by acknowledging Te Whāriki as an intellectual framework (Ministry of Education, 2017). Therefore, this dissertation suggests curriculum initiatives that position families as co-weavers of education alongside educators and children, equity-driven funding, and ongoing professional development (Ministry of Education, 2018; Wood & Hedges, 2024).

A personal reflection on my experiences working as an early childhood educator is included in the final chapter, which also highlights the continuous battle for respect and recognition in the field of early childhood education. It calls for a continued commitment to diversity and respect in early childhood education and ends with a message of empowerment for early childhood education professionals, reinforcing the critical role they play (Ballaschk et al., 2024; Cooper, 2025; OECD, 2019).Mother Teresa's words align well with Te Whāriki's (Ministry of Education, 2017) objective for

relationships that respect and uphold the mana[1] of all tamariki[2] and whānau[3] serves as the foundation for this dissertation.

[1] The power of being, authority, prestige, spiritual power, authority, status, and control.
[2] Children
[3] Extended family, multigenerational group of relatives, or group of people who work together on and for a common cause.

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Finally, and most importantly, I want to express my deepest gratitude to God, who provided me with everything I needed to begin and complete this dream. Your grace carried me through the toughest days and made this achievement possible.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which, to a substantial extent, has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

[Archerna Manokaran]

Chapter one

Introduction

"Ma te mahi ka mohio, ma te mahi ka marama, ma te mahi ka matatau."

Through practice comes knowledge, through knowledge comes understanding, through understanding comes expertise.

(Hedges, 2010)

In early childhood education, play is more than just a recreational activity; it is a vibrant, dynamic environment for learning that promotes competence, agency, and autonomy. It offers a natural basis for the emotional, social, and cognitive growth of children and supports the idea that they are capable and active learners. There is nothing like the sound of children's voices ringing with joyful laughter, warm waves of innocence pouring over the young learners as true sense of play and belonging fills the space.

This research is based on both professional interest and reflection. Although a large amount of research has demonstrated the advantages of play-based learning in fostering children's overall development (Lunga et al., 2022; Yasnitsky, 2014), parents may still show resistance or skepticism toward this strategy.

The primary methodological strategy used in this dissertation is a systematic literature review (Booth et al., 2016; Snyder, 2019). The literature review is considered as the primary research strategy that directs the analysis rather than as an addition. A systematic literature review guarantees a thorough and open procedure for finding, picking, and evaluating pertinent scholarly sources. Instead of gathering empirical data, this method lays the foundation for addressing the research questions by analysing the body of existing information. In this sense, the literature review itself serves as the dissertation's methodology, influencing the research's course and results.

International research supports this pessimism, as evidenced by the review by Pyle et al. (2017), which emphasises parental pressure for greater structured learning in kindergarten settings due to worries about academic preparedness and the expectations of the primary school transition. This trend has been documented in a variety of educational settings, such as Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Greece, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates (Pyle et al., 2017).

1.1 Rationale

This reluctance is something I have personally experienced as a parent. At first, I was drawn to structured learning because I thought it would help my child's academic development. I have learned that this perspective is not unusual and can be examined using the Ladder of Inference, a model that describes how people use a sequence of mental processes to go from observable facts to beliefs and behaviour. These consist of choosing certain information, giving it context, drawing inferences, assuming things, and finally embracing the ideas that motivate actions (Argyris, 1985).

In my case, I chose evidence that supported my presumptions that success was associated with rigorous academics, metrics, and structured environments. Unconsciously, I disregarded or rejected the evidence that play may also serve as a form of education. My subsequent convictions shaped my behaviour and choices as a parent, preferring more structured approaches over play-based education.

These have now changed, and this realisation led to a greater curiosity about the ways in which early childhood leaders interact with families, especially in relation to play-based learning. Reflecting back on my experiences, I have grown in my respect of the dedication and expertise of my colleagues of early childhood professionals in play-based education. The work demands not only expertise and compassion, but also a readiness to stand up for children's rights for an education that respects their natural curiosity and creativity.

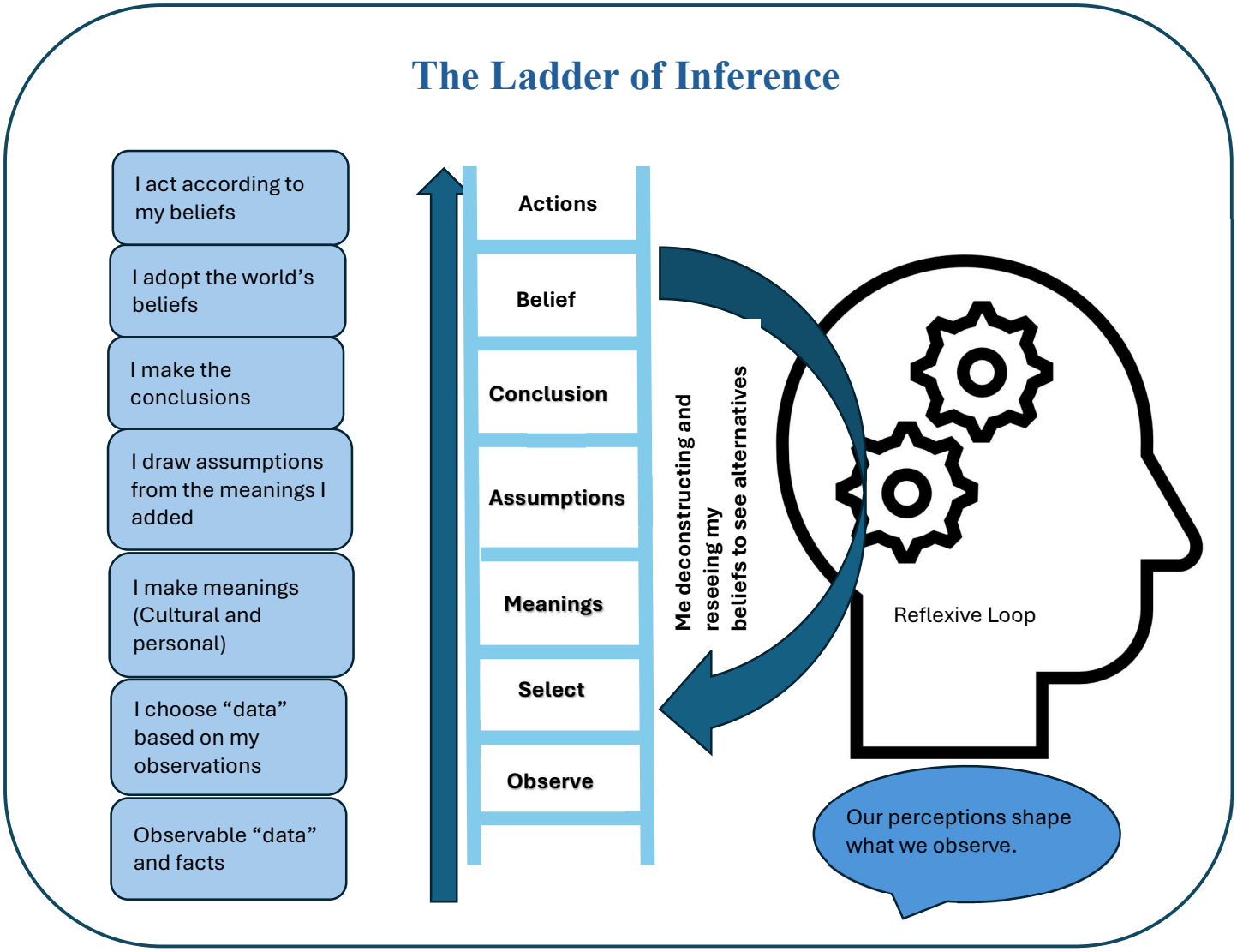
I started asking questions such as: Which techniques help in questioning and changing deeply held beliefs? How can leaders overcome parental doubts and promote a common awareness of the importance of play through interactions with parents? How may these interactions result in more cooperative, trustworthy parent-leader relationships? I wonder what might be if everyone decided to view early childhood education as a sector that is characterised by the joy, courage, and expertise of professionals that keep it going every day, in addition to its challenges? The literature review that makes up my research is personal and academically motivated. During my undergraduate studies, I became interested in play-based learning after reading about its beneficial impact on children's emotional, social, and cognitive development (Lunga et al., 2022; Yasnitsky, 2014). I started thinking about how my own educational views had been formed as I continued my studies; and at the time did not realise how I formed these thoughts again related to the Ladder of Inference (Argyris, 1985).

An important theoretical model that guided my study was the Ladder of Inference (Argyris, 1985), which offered a framework for analysing my own presumptions and ideas on play-based and structured learning. I observed data from conversations with Singaporean parents and selected information that seemed pertinent, initially overlooking other viewpoints.

These observations led me to make meanings and form presumptions that play-based learning had no or little impact on children's learning and that a structured education was preferable. From what I observed in my surroundings, I also selected evidence that reinforced this view. These presumptions influenced my actions, such as my preference for a chosen methodology and my agreement with the opinions of those in my immediate surroundings. I was able to go back and review my conclusions, challenge my presumptions, and reconsider what I believe in accordance with new knowledge by using the Ladder of Inference. My systematic literature review was guided by this reflexive process, emphasising literature and perspectives that could challenge my initial presumptions and shape my rationale by highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of play-based learning

Figure 1
The Ladder of Inference

Note. The Ladder of Inference (my personal diagram, based on Argyris, 1985)



The Ladder of Inference by (Argyris, 1985) shows how people, both individually and in teams, interpret experiences and create meaning. It starts with an occurrence that can be seen, from which people:

1. Choose information depending on their preexisting knowledge or interests.
2. Apply personal and cultural filters to give this data meaning.
3. Assume things and get to conclusions.
4. Form opinions that are subsequently regarded as "truth."
5. Act on these convictions.

This cycle has a significant impact on decision-making yet is frequently overlooked. Leaders may assist parents in changing their perspectives on early childhood education by comprehending and dissecting this process as in the figure 1 above.

Education was viewed as the key to success in the home where I grew up. To give stability and opportunity, my father, who was from Singapore, and mother, who immigrated from India, put in countless hours at menial professions. Academic success was crucial as a sign of self-worth and as a path to stability. The idea that success and intellect were closely related to grades and formal education was reinforced by the many discussions about school achievement in our extended family.

I can now see how I chose information that supported my belief system and eliminated those that didn't, such as the importance of unstructured play or child-led inquiry. It requires courage to look at these thought patterns and to challenge the presumptions we develop. I made parental decisions based on my perception that structured education was more acceptable or successful for my own children.

But delving deeper into the research led me to go down my own ladder of inference, reevaluating my assumptions and taking into account fresh information on how children learn effectively. In addition to changing my perspective, this approach has shown me why it can be so challenging for other people, particularly parents who have comparable cultural or academic expectations, to comply and follow.

As an early childhood educator, this reflection has reinforced my dedication to promoting the joy and richness of play. The joy of teaching stays at the core of our occupation; this joy is fuelled by the trusting relationships that we develop with children and their parents, we witness in their eyes throughout their learning, and our privilege of fostering their natural curiosity.

I am especially curious about how early childhood leaders may help parents uncover and reevaluate their assumptions about play-based learning by facilitating conversations with them. To promote children's learning, leaders may be able to do this by encouraging greater transparency, lowering resistance, and creating stronger, more cooperative collaborations.

1.2 The significance of this study

Early childhood education (ECE) has drawn a lot of attention from governments and policymakers in recent years because of its long-term effects on children's learning, wellbeing, and future social outcomes (OECD, 2019). In this context, ECE leadership has been recognised as an essential element in promoting quality enhancement, especially by influencing practice and encouraging moral and professional behaviour in learning settings (Kivunja, 2015).

Although play-based learning is widely acknowledged in the research on early childhood education (ECE) for its developmental advantages in promoting children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development, its use is coming under growing pressure. This is shown in countries like Singapore, where play is marginalised in preschool settings due to academic expectations and high-stakes testing (Karuppiah, 2022). Parents' lack of awareness of or appreciation for play as a valid teaching strategy, who may prioritise academic preparedness over holistic development, seems to be a contributing factor (Barblett et al., 2016) to this marginalisation of play.

Previous studies have looked at how parents view play and the advantages of family involvement, though little is known about how ECE professionals, like centre leaders or administrators, actively encourage or model parent participation in the setting of play-based learning. The important juncture where ECE leaders might serve as mediator between pedagogical aims and family expectations is overlooked in some studies, which may regard parent participation and leadership as distinct domains.

In addition, rather than looking at the larger leadership practices that facilitate or impede these engagements, a large portion of the existing work concentrates on the classroom educator role in involving parents, for example, by parent-teacher meetings or learning stories. For parents to participate meaningfully in play-based learning, educators must be competent as well as have a common goal that is backed by professional development, leadership, and aligned policies (Barblett et al., 2016) in relation to play-based learning.

Prior studies have emphasised the value of play as a teaching strategy for supporting children's overall development (Barblett et al., 2016) as well as the crucial part that parental engagement and expectations play in influencing children's educational experiences (Karuppiah, 2022). However, it has been demonstrated that effective leadership in education is dependent on well-defined theoretical underpinnings, including constructivist and sociocultural viewpoints, which highlight how children learn by social interaction and active involvement (Kivunja, 2015).

Even though each of these research areas is well-established on individual basis, there is still a significant research gap that unifies play-based learning, parental participation, and leadership approaches under a single analytical framework. In order to bridge this gap, the current study explores how leadership in early childhood education may serve as a mediator in the interaction between play-based pedagogy and parental expectations.

Given this background, the goal of this study is to explore how early childhood education leaders perceive and carry out their responsibilities in bridging the gap between parental expectations and pedagogical practices in play-based frameworks. This is relevant for all countries, where the sustainability of play as a fundamental method of education is possibly being called into question by the intersection of cultural, sociological, and policy forces.

The aim of this research is to inform more responsive and integrated leadership strategies by identifying the leadership practices that facilitate or hinder their participation in play-based learning and how leadership may strengthen ECE centre-family relationships to promote developmentally appropriate play-based practices. From the perspective of theory, one of the main factors influencing the quality of early childhood settings is the move toward shared forms of leaderships, such as collaborative leadership and distributed leadership.

ECE centre teams that practice participatory leadership, where decision-making is shared and group contributions are respected, may perform better for children and are more resilient (Douglass & Kivunja, 2015). Furthermore, crucial connections built on trust are crucial to ECE leadership (Boardman, 2003). These connections create situations where children may flourish holistically by extending beyond the educational team to families and communities.

The intersection of advocacy and leadership, especially in defending children's rights, is among the most profound realisations that I have gained from this postgraduate study. The right to play is recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and recent research (for example, Wong et al., 2025) emphasises the importance of voluntary, flexible, and process-focused play for development. Self-directed play promotes autonomy, creativity, and social reasoning, according to studies like those by McNair et al. and Molinari et al as citied in Wong et al. (2025).

Play is more than just leisure; it's a crucial setting for children to voice their thoughts, make choices, and mould their lives. Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) assert that play enables children to be heard by receptive adults, enabling them to participate fully in their educational setting. As children make decisions about roles, resources, relationships, and their environmental surroundings, it may promote shared power between children and adults. As noted by Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) play is a powerful tool for encouraging deep involvement in early childhood education settings.

However, the level of children's participation is greatly influenced by adult involvement. Adults influence the interactional spaces that either encourage or restrict children's participation (Bae, 2009). Early childhood professionals' preparation, goals, and empathy have an impact on how children engage and what they learn from play. Based on Johansson and Sandberg (2010) and Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) it is essential to comprehend children's viewpoints to enable meaningful engagement.

1.3 The Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore how the early childhood education (ECE) leaders could communicate with parents to encourage play-based learning and to highlight strategies for leadership that improve school-family relationships in early learning settings. Two objectives shape this study in the form of a literature review. They are to:

- Explore the ways that ECE leaders assist parents in comprehending the benefits and tenets of play-based learning.
- Explore the methods that can be employed by ECE leaders to engage parents in play-based lessons.

Both of these objectives inform the research question:

What does the early childhood education leadership research reveal about early childhood education leaders engaging with parents in the context of play-based learning?

1.4 Justification for using a Literature Review

Being an international student with a pair of young children, I encounter a number of challenges that make traditional methods of collecting data, such surveys or interviews as well as unfeasible for this dissertation's timeframe. I am mostly in charge of taking care of our children. My ability to participate in participant selection, organising, and data collection tasks is restricted by these obligations. My ability to conduct empirical fieldwork is further limited by the time limitations related to completing dissertation milestones. Even though I studied full-time, I needed to use a methodology that worked for me in a practical way.

In this scenario, performing a systematic literature review provided a thorough and useful substitute that enabled me to analyse and synthesise the body of research findings that previously existing (Snyder, 2019). This method works best when researchers strike a balance between their personal obligations and limitations and academic needs (Meyer & Meissel, 2023; Mutch, 2013). Additionally, without the administrative difficulties of primary data collection, literature reviews offer a useful method for establishing a thorough grasp of theoretical frameworks, identifying knowledge gaps, and coming up with evidence-based insights (Booth et al., 2012; Ridley, 2012).

With only five months to complete a 60-point dissertation in a single semester as an international student, it was not practical to do primary research through case studies, interviews, or surveys. The period for gathering and analysing data would have been shortened if these methods had been subject to ethical approval. As a result, the best methodology was determined to be a systematic literature review. This method's primary drawback is it depends on secondary data, which excludes participant narratives and first-hand lived experiences from the study. Although this is a methodological weakness, it is also recognised that all study methods have inherent drawbacks, and the selected approach was the most practical and thorough given the constraints of time and scope. As a result, this approach provided a reliable and practical way to accomplish my study goals within the constraints of time as well as while upholding academic integrity.

1.5 The Structure of the Chapters

Chapter 1: This chapter gives an in-depth overview of the research's foundation, including the main goals and objectives as well as rationale, the theoretical framework. The Ladder of Inference guides the inquiry, the research gaps and significance, personal perspective, and the rationale for performing the research. It also describes the research methodology that was utilised when delving into the research problem.

Chapter 2: This chapter focuses on the methodology. This includes selecting appropriate databases and sources, formulating criteria for inclusion and exclusion, collecting pertinent material, doing theme analysis, and formulating specific research questions are the main steps in the methodical search process. The objective was to compile and summarise research results that looked at how ECE leaders may involve and parents in play-based learning environments and understand the value of play. This method ensured that a wide variety of scholarly and professional sources were covered in the literature review.

Chapter 3: The chapter looks at important leadership models and how they relate to cooperation and teamwork, such as distributed and participatory leadership. Attention is given to the role of the leader in fostering culturally sensitive communication and respectful parent relationships. It also discusses the dearth of professional growth for ECE leaders, advocating for improved instruction, assistance, and policy acknowledgment of their vital role.

Chapter 4: This chapter covers the importance of play-based learning in early childhood education and offers an overview of the research question. It starts by discussing the importance and advantages of play, types of play as well as how play is conceived within the framework of play-based learning. The theoretical concept of play as a socially mediated and culturally entrenched phenomenon is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Along with discussing children's rights and involvement, the chapter emphasises the importance of child agency in education.

Two main perspectives are used to analyse parental involvement such as the need to educate parents about the importance of play in early learning and the expectations of parents regarding academic versus play-based approaches, with some reference to the Singaporean setting. To maintain relevance to current early childhood education settings, the chapter ends by looking at how digital technology might be effectively incorporated into play-based learning contexts. These components work together to provide an in-depth understanding of play as a fundamental early childhood education approach.

Chapter 5: This chapter offers an analysis of the findings in relation to the research question, which explores the ways in which parents and early childhood education (ECE) leadership interact within the context of play-based learning. Three interconnected themes such as, play-based education, parental engagement, and ECE leadership that emerged in the literature serve as the framework for the discussion.

Chapter 6: This concluding chapter summarises the dissertation's main conclusions and makes suggestions for future practice. It starts with a conclusion that restates the research question and highlights the key takeaways from the literature review, such as the value of relational leadership, the necessity of good parent-teacher communication, and the difficulties in fostering play-based learning in environments that are culturally diverse.

The chapter then offers suggestions for improving curriculum practices, enhancing parental involvement in early childhood education settings, and augmenting leadership development. Finally, there is a reflection where I discuss my professional and personal viewpoints as an early childhood educator, emphasising the continuous difficulties in gaining status and respect in the field. The chapter ends with a message of empowerment for early childhood educators, reaffirming the importance of their profession and the necessity of a long-term dedication to inclusively in the field of early childhood setting.

Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

A literature review was chosen as the main methodological strategy for the research question. Finding, evaluating, and synthesising pertinent scholarly works that provided insight into a particular topic were elements of the literature review. This approach highlighted the best approaches to answering the research question and provided contextual insight. Additionally, it entailed assessing sources critically to make sure they supported the suggested investigation (Ridley, 2012).

For literature reviews, there are a number of well-established frameworks. The integrative review, semi-systematic review, and systematic review are some of the most widely utilised for reviewing literature. Under the right circumstances, each of these methods can be useful in addressing specific kinds of research issues (Snyder, 2019).

There are numerous variations of literature reviews, where researchers may use aspects from various methodologies to achieve their goals. Reviewing earlier research is a standard procedure in scholarly writings across all academic areas. This may aid in outlining the goals and hypotheses of the study, assessing and mapping the body of current literature, and answering the research question (Mutch, 2013). As explained by Snyder (2019) this procedure is commonly known as the literature review.

2.1.1 Methodology

Methodology includes both the actual methods of gathering and analysing data as well as the theoretical frameworks, ethical issues, and paradigms that serve as conceptual tools to direct research (Meyer & Meissel, 2023). Using a purposive approach entails purposefully creating research techniques that complement a study's overall objectives. The wider methodological framework is served by the thoughtful selection and application of these techniques (Meyer & Meissel, 2023).

This study looked at studies and related commentary of how early childhood education (ECE) leaders may interact with families in the context of play-based learning. It was informed, in part, utilising a systematic literature review methodology. To determine how leadership techniques are modified to accommodate various family settings and expectations, the literature review explored peer-reviewed literature.

Recognising parental viewpoints and their alignment or misalignment with curriculum objectives is stressed in modern conversations regarding Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum. While Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) advocates for a versatile and comprehensive approach to early education, emphasising overarching outcomes like communication, belonging, and well-being, this adaptability can occasionally result in confusion regarding the expected learning outcomes for children.

Chan (2019) highlighted that educators may encounter persistent difficulties in effectively conveying learning goals and progress to parents, especially within a superdiverse community where families may have diverse expectations regarding early childhood education. This lack of clarity may lead to misunderstandings about the importance of play-based learning, particularly among parents who expect more structured, academic methodologies. Such discrepancies between parental beliefs and the curriculum's holistic approach may create a gap between parent's perceptions of what their children are learning and the objectives that educators aim to achieve through play-based activities.

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) aims to tackle these challenges by specifying learning outcomes and offering more comprehensive guidance for planning and assessment. The updated curriculum clearly acknowledges the importance of enhancing communication and collaboration with families to ensure that learning objectives are clearer and more significant. To comprehend how educational concepts are communicated to families, my methodology incorporated studies that looked at leadership communication tactics, and those that employed interpretive techniques such as metaphor as explored in Fenech et al. (2020).

To evaluate how leaders negotiate the challenges of play-based learning in collaboration with parents, the literature review also took into account leadership characteristics including adaptability and pedagogical leadership (Muijs et al., 2004). Studies that showed leadership techniques adapted to curriculum implementation and family engagement in various early childhood education contexts were included. Analysis was informed by whether studies identified important leadership traits like ability to adapt as well as a comprehensive pedagogical approach; whether leaders employed interpretive communication techniques like narratives to help families comprehend the tenets of a play-based curriculum; and the degree to which leadership practices promoted culturally sensitive partnerships with families.

2.1.2 Systematic Search Approach

To ensure academic rigour and congruence between research findings and the literature review overall goals, a systematic approach to literature searching became essential. As emphasised by Booth et al. (2012) a systematic approach offers transparency, consistency, and critical engagement with literature, which are characteristics of high-quality research, in contrast to ad hoc or convenience-based searches. This approach was particularly crucial because play-based learning, involvement of parents, and leadership in early childhood education are interconnected. It made it possible for me to read an array of publications.

Finding, assessing, and synthesising relevant research was carried out through a systematic search method. This procedure was guided by the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), which offers a clear and repeatable format for performing literature reviews (Liberati et al., 2009).

2.1.3 My Realised Methodology

The realised process map shows the significance sources that influenced the development of this study were integrated and developed. It visually demonstrated the ways in which different literary threads on play-based learning, parental involvement, and ECE leadership influenced the structure and topic of each chapter. Figure 2 illustrates my realised methodology as a series of phases. The first phase of literature searching was to inform my research proposal and amendments I made to my proposal. Some of this initial literature supported the illustrated PRISMA processes that informed the two chapters that follow this one. In some locations, thicker arrows show the process in places. I have thickened this to emphasise the use of PRISMA 1 as well as PRISMA 2 and to show how chapter five mostly links to chapters three and four.

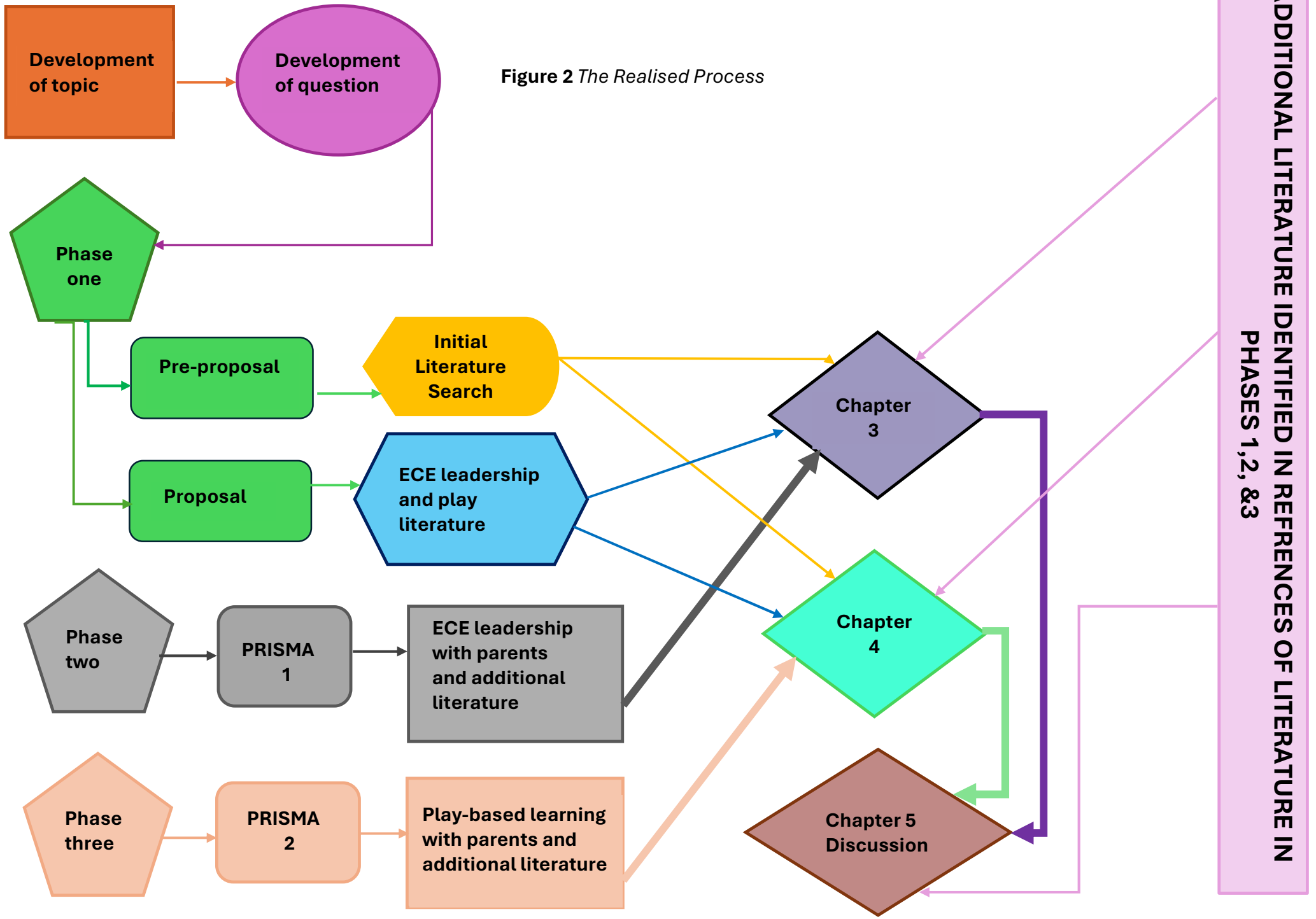


Figure 2 *The Realised Process*

2.1.4 Development of Topic and Research Question

My decision to explore leadership in early childhood education (ECE) as well as its relationship to play-based learning and parental participation was partly driven by my interest to question my preconceived ideas about play. As suggested by Ridley (2012) this literature review used a methodical search approach that is informed by a continual process of involvement with both professional knowledge and academic literature. The conceptual focus can be gradually refined by this method, which fosters a contemplative and cyclical reading process refers to the process of reading, considering, improving, and then going back to the literature several times while conducting study. The criteria as follows were used to choose publications for the review in accordance with PRISMA framework (Liberati et al., 2009).

2.1.5 Information Sources

I employed a variety of academic search services and scholarly databases to find reliable and peer-reviewed material. These included the AUT Library Search, Google Scholar, the Scopus database, and the SAGE Journals database. The platforms Google Scholar, Scopus, and SAGE Journals were chosen because of their wide coverage, scholarly standing, and applicability to leadership and education studies. Google Scholar was helpful for finding a wide variety of academic resources, such as open-access content and grey literature, which supported the AUT Library Search subscription-based resources. A thorough search over a broad field of inquiry was achieved by using two different databases and Google Scholar, which also reduced the chance of missing important literature (Ridley, 2012).

The AUT Library Search was very helpful because it provides access to a variety of publications and resources by retrieving content from several databases to which AUT has subscriptions. I also discovered that certain databases sent me to different platforms while I was searching. For instance, Scopus frequently routed me to full-text content provided by publishers such as SAGE Journals, whereas publications from SAGE Journals occasionally connected to Taylor and Francis. I was able to cover a wide range of research by using many databases, which also reduced the possibility that I would overlook any significant literature (Ridley, 2012).

2.1.6. Phase One – Pre-proposal and Proposal

I read academic material for my pre-proposal and proposal. About 15 papers were found by my first keyword search, broad terms like "parent involvement", "play-based learning" and "early childhood education" as well as "ECE leadership," were among the first search terms used. However, these produced a large number of irrelevant results, such as research from the fields of basic education and medicine. I reassessed my search criteria to better match the scope of my topic and research question. This preliminary review enabled me to then use the PRISMA framework in a methodical manner in phases two and three.

2.1.6.1 Search Strategy

In phase two and three, I started by using a systematic and planned search approach and combined keywords using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and captured phrase variants using wildcards (e.g., *). "Preschool", "early childhood play-based" AND "technology", and "ECE " OR “preschool" AND “play” are a few examples of more focused search terms that I used. These adjustments made the search results more focused and more in line with my area of study.

2.1.6.2 Data Collection

The PRISMA framework that fostered transparency and replicability throughout systematic literature reviews from phase two and phase three (Liberati et al., 2009), served as the guidance for data gathering. Boolean operators (AND, OR), wildcards (e.g., *), and topic-specific keyword combinations such as

- “early childhood play-based AND technology”
- “ECE OR preschool AND play”,
- “leadership AND ECE”
- “early childhood leaders AND parent engagement”
- “parent involvement AND play-based learning AND ECE”
- “ece or preschool leadership*”
- “benefits* of play based”
- “ play in the early years”
- “ the value of children's play”
- “play based and parent perception*”
- “play based”, “play based approach”
- “play based education for early years”

were all used in the search process. After determining the relevance of the titles and abstracts, a full-text evaluation of the chosen articles was conducted. PRISMA diagrams illustrate the inclusion/exclusion phases and the selection process (see Figures 3 and 4).

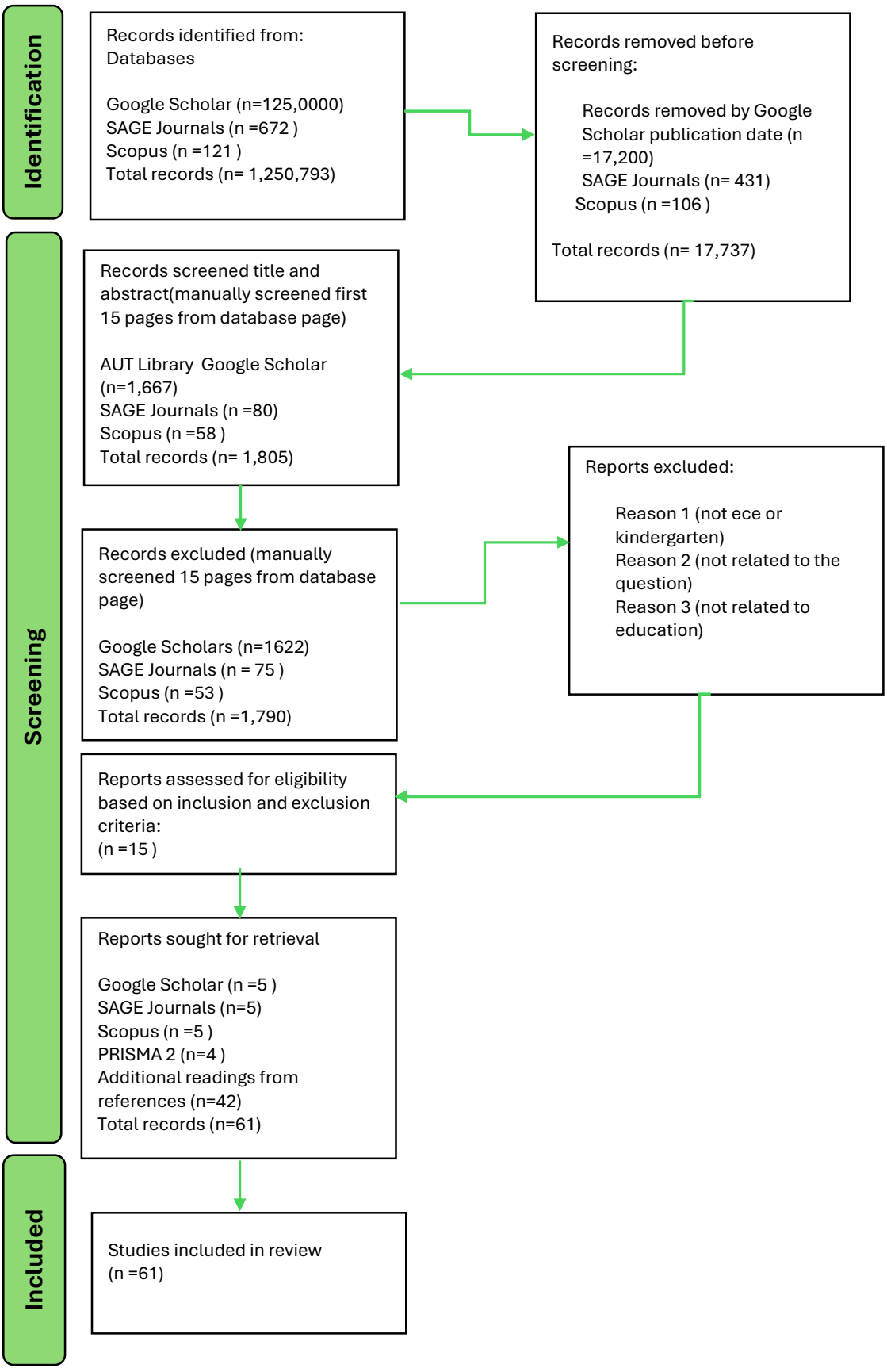
2.1.6. 3 Phase Two -PRISMA 1

A systematic search method was followed throughout the selecting process. To quickly filter out sources that were obviously outside the purview of the study, in the identification step, relevant papers were retrieved using predetermined keywords such as “Leadership AND early childhood education”, “Leadership AND play-based education” and “ece leaders AND parents involvement” from academic databases such AUT Library databases search, Google Scholar, Scopus, and SAGE Journals. Once duplicates were eliminated, titles and abstracts of the remaining papers were examined as part of a screening procedure. The focus here is PRISMA 1 (for ECE Leadership with Parents).

The full-text publications were then evaluated to verify their applicability, paying close attention to the fundamental ideas of play-based learning, parental involvement, and ECE leadership. Decisions made during the process were both systematic and responsive. Older selections were reviewed to make sure they were pertinent and in line with the conceptual emphasis of the study. Criteria including methodological quality, topical relevance, and conformity to inclusion/exclusion criteria served as the basis for this re-evaluation 15 readings were found using PRISMA 1 as in Figure 3.

Figure 3

PRISMA -1 Flow Diagram of the Search and Selection Strategy for ECE Leadership with Parents (Records excluded manually screened first 15 pages from each database)



2.1.6. 4 Phase Three -PRISMA 2

In phase three, similar to phase two, a methodical search process was used, but with a focus on finding literature that explored PRISMA 2 (for Play-Based Learning with Parents).

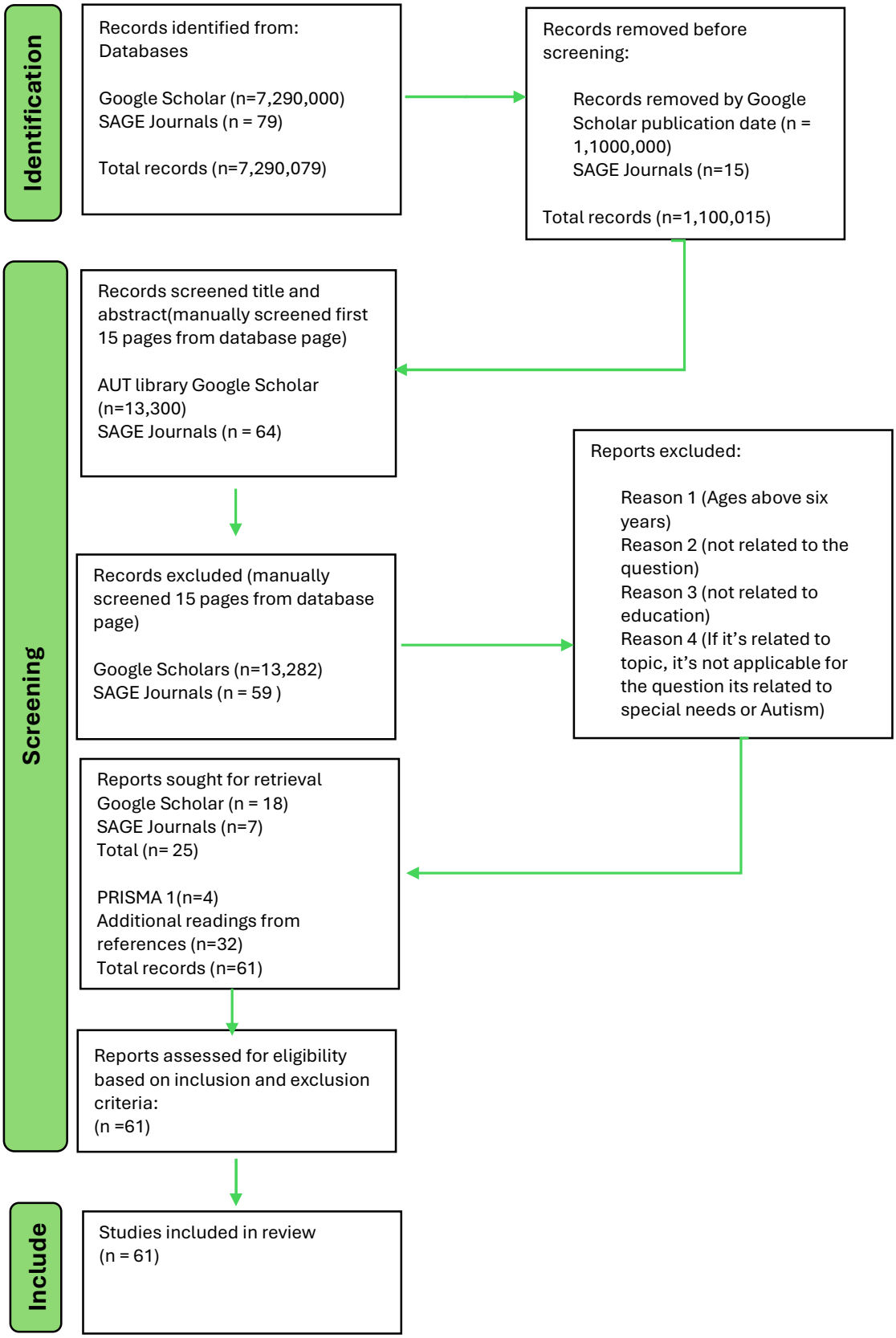
I utilised a specific set of specified keywords, such as "play-based learning," "play-based AND early childhood education," "participations AND parents AND play- based early childhood and related phrases, the same academic databases like the AUT Library databases, the ones from Google Scholar and SAGE Journals were retrieved to identify the articles. By focussing more narrowly, the search found studies that specifically addressed the play-based pedagogies.

After duplicates were removed, abstracts and titles were reviewed for compliance with the more detailed inclusion standards set for this stage. After that, full-text publications were assessed for eligibility, giving priority to studies like play-based education benefits, explored parents' involvement, parents' perspective about play based education.

Similar to the process in phase two, selections were made in a methodical and iterative manner, enabling previous selections to be reassessed for coherence and applicability to the developing theoretical structure. Methodological quality, topic relevance, and compliance with the phase-specific modified inclusion/exclusion criteria were assessed for each study. 25 readings were generated in PRISMA 2 as in Figure 4.

Figure 4

PRISMA-2 Flow Diagram of the Search and Selection Strategy for Play-Based Learning with Parents (Records excluded manually screened first 15 pages from each database)



2.1.6. 5 *Inclusion*

To maintain academic credibility and reliability, only studies that were published in peer-reviewed publications were initially included in the PRISMA searches. However, as the literature search moved on, it became clear that certain quality sources, such as official policy documents, government studies, and doctorate dissertations, also provided important and relevant insights on early childhood education leadership, play-based learning and cultural and sociocultural perspectives.

For instance, official reports like Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) and policy documents such as OECD (2025) offered important information for comprehending national and international leadership frameworks. The selection of Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) framework (Ministry of Education, 2022) and Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) demonstrates how the curriculum resources represent various national agendas and educational philosophies. As a reflection of New Zealand's bicultural beliefs and focus on holistic development, Te Whāriki places play, relationships, as well as cultural identity at the core of early childhood education. The NEL framework, on the other hand, reflects Singapore's policy aimed towards striking a balance between structured learning and play in order to prepare children towards the demands of primary school. When comparing these two frameworks, it gave the opportunity to think about how leadership styles, cultural values, and governmental agendas influence the value of play in early childhood education.

Furthermore, rich, context-specific insights not often found in journal articles were provided by doctoral dissertations like Matapo (2021) which explored cultural and social-cultural perspectives of Pacific Indigenous philosophy, and Alam (2022) which explored play-based learning in early childhood education.

Although, peer-reviewed publications continued to be the main focus of the review, grey literature was selectively included to improve the findings' depth, inclusivity, as well as contextual relevance and the sources showed academic integrity and closely matched the objectives of the study.

Only English language articles were taken into consideration to keep consistency and allow for appropriate interpretation of the findings. To capture recent advancements and contemporary viewpoints in play-based learning and early childhood education (ECE) leadership, the analysis concentrated mainly on literature released between 2014 and 2025.

To be able to cover ten years of academic progress and correspond with notable changes in international early childhood education policies, leadership structures, and curricular reforms, the year 2014 was selected as the starting point. By covering research conducted up until 2025, the review was able to take into account the most recent findings and developing patterns, including reactions to shifting educational environments like a greater focus on family involvement and culturally sensitive methods. Research from any nation or area was accepted as long as it made a contribution to the knowledge of play-based learning or early childhood education leadership applicable to my study.

Each study's significance was assessed using a variety of factors, including its publication in peer-reviewed academic journals, its applicability to the main themes in the review, as well as the theoretical or practical insights it provided into curriculum methods and leadership practices in early childhood education contexts. In several instances, the study’s impact on pedagogy and policy further justified its inclusion. To ensure that the review represents an internationally informed understanding of early childhood education leadership and play-based learning practices, studies from a variety of social, cultural, or policy perspectives were purposefully taken into consideration.

Heikka et al. (2013) support this approach by stressing the value of contextualising early childhood education leadership across various national and cultural contexts. They contend that international viewpoints enhance the field by providing a variety of leadership models and practices that are sensitive to local needs. This systematic

method made sure that the process of locating, assessing, and high-quality literature that aligned with the review's objectives was targeted and methodical.

2.1.6.6 Exclusion

In compliance with the PRISMA framework, a set of exclusion criteria was developed to guarantee the calibre, emphasis, and applicability of the literature associated with ECE leadership and play-based learning (Liberati et al., 2009). These were continuously used throughout the full- text review stage as well as the abstract and title screening stages. Studies of ECE Leadership that did not specifically discuss the relevance of early childhood education leadership especially in relation to parents, communication or play-based learning were excluded.

Studies that were not directly relevant to early childhood education were omitted, as were those from elementary, secondary, higher education, or adult educational settings, in addition to those focused on general organisational contexts. Studies including children who were over six years old were excluded to keep the focus clearly on early childhood. Similarly, studies that predominantly dealt with children on the autistic spectrum or with impairments were excluded as they did not explicitly address the study questions or had no clear link to leadership or play-based learning in early childhood settings.

Publications such as editorials, commentaries, or opinion pieces were not prioritised. Non-peer-reviewed sources including conference abstracts, theses or dissertations, textbook sections, and reports were not included to maintain consistency. To prevent redundancy, duplicate entries found in several databases were eliminated during the initial screening process.

2.1.6.7 *Selection Process*

PRISMA 1 ECE leadership with parents

The selection process for PRISMA 1. During the identification process 17,200 records were found in Google Scholar, while 431 records were obtained from SAGE Journals. Scopus 106 records retrieved. In the screening stage first 15 pages of each database's results were manually screened to ensure manageability and relevance due to the volume of results, particularly from Google Scholar. Predefined eligibility and exclusion stage requirements such as relevance for early childhood settings, the year of publication 2014–2025, articles from peer-reviewed journals written in English were used while reviewing titles and abstracts. Several publications were excluded because of this screening approach; only those that specifically addressed ECE leadership in relation to play-based education and parental involvement were retained. Additionally, I looked at cross-references between research, which helped me find a more collection. In the end, this iterative method generated a final pool of 79.

PRISMA 2 Play based learning with parents

The selection process in PRISMA 2 Play based learning with parents follows the same stages as PRISMA 1. In identification process 13,282 records were found in Google Scholar, while 59 records were obtained from SAGE Journals. In the screening stage first 15 pages of each database's results were manually screened to ensure manageability and relevance due to the volume of results, particularly from Google Scholar.

Predefined eligibility and exclusion stage requirements such as relevance for early childhood settings, the year of publication 2014–2025, articles from peer-reviewed journals, English language were used while reviewing titles and abstracts. Several publications were excluded because of this screening approach; only those that specifically addressed to play-based education and parental involvement were retained. I looked at cross-references between research, which helped me find a more collection. In the end, this iterative method generated a final pool of 79.

The literature selection process was managed in an organised and transparent manner with the help of the PRISMA framework (Liberati et al., 2009). Through the phases of identity, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, it provided guidance. The precise selection procedures used for the literature on play-based learning as well as ECE leadership were shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Through thematic categorisation and ongoing comparison, patterns and recurrent ideas emerged as the research were examined. These themes evolved iteratively when pertinent articles were examined; they were not preset. Keywords, ideas, and research findings from each article were recorded in a summary table of ECE leadership with parents and play-based learning with parents. Under the early childhood education leadership theme, studies that focused on parent involvement, communication, leadership positions, pedagogical and distributed leadership were categorised. Play as a teaching strategy, including its types, theoretical foundations, and impacts on learning outcomes, were categorised under play-based learning. Studies that touched on both themes were categorised based on their primary focus. These two areas served as the basis for the thematic analysis. These were subsequently compiled and grouped into logical theme categories as shown in Appendices one, two, three and four.

Additional Literature Identified in References of Literature in Phases 1,2, &3

I also utilised reference mining by reading the bibliographies of key studies and citation tracking an example, during the systematic review process, a particular concentration was placed on studies that referenced foundational works by Schön (1992) and Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996) as citied in (Cardno & Reynolds, 2009), which explore ideas like theories-in-use, reflective practice, and single-loop and double-loop learning. These were included because they helped me understand my own reflective process where I started to question my assumptions about play-based learning.

I inadvertently ignored data that backed up the educational benefits of play in favour of selectively interpreting educational achievement through the lenses of academic performance and structure. My parenting decisions were influenced by these interpretations, which strengthened my inclination toward conventional methods and diminished the educational benefits of play-based learning and when major themes developed such as distributed leadership**,** parental engagement and distributed decision-making**,** lack of professional development opportunities for ECE leaders, children's right to play and participation, play-based learning frameworks**,** integrating digital technology into play-based learning. After more thorough examination these themes were produced rather than predetermined and arose inductively throughout the process of screening and synthesising the literature.

2.1.6.8 *Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis*

The systematic and essential process of data extraction established the framework for synthesis. It is helpful for having a clear idea of the information that is to be utilised in the thematic analysis before choosing which data to extract. A thematic analysis technique used to arrange pertinent data into significant themes and patterns after it has been gathered from a range of scholarly publications and studies. A deeper comprehension of the links and connections between important components is made possible by this approach (Booth et al., 2012).

Keeping thorough and precise records is essential to effectively managing the literature. It guarantees accurate citation and facilitates simple article retrieval. To make this easier, I created a manual file system as mentioned in table of overview thematic analysis in which I compile articles and their references. According to their primary focal areas, these are divided into four distinct folders using a thematic classification such as leadership, parents, play and references (Mutch, 2013).

After gathering the data, I analysed it to find important themes, trends, and patterns aligned to my research question and findings. After an analysis of each paper, the main conclusions were recorded and categorised into broad groups. These categories concentrate on fundamental topics including play-based learning, parental participation, leadership, and related findings (Mutch, 2013) as mentioned in the Table 1 of overview thematic analysis.

To determine how other research related to or deviated from these main themes, I undertook a comparative analysis. For instance, I explored certain leadership theories like distributed leadership which is highlighted as being successful in promoting parent participation in play-based learning settings. In early childhood settings, distributed leadership which is defined by shared accountability and cooperative decision-making between teachers, parents, and community members is frequently seen as crucial to promoting inclusive and part.

Overview of Thematic Analysis (Table)

Table 1
Overview Thematic Analysis

Overview Thematic Analysis		
Steps	**Actions taken**	**Specifics/Thematic Groups**
1. Extraction of data	Systematic gathering of relevant data	Based on the emphasise outcomes, play-based learning, parents, and leadership.
2. Management of Literature	Manual filing system; recording of articles and references	Organised into folders according to themes, such as leadership, play, parenting, and references (Mutch, 2013).
3. Analysis of Thematic	Read and highlight key findings from publications.	Taking notes and classifying the findings.
		Leadership: disrupted leadership Styles, roles, and impact on collaboration.
		Participation of Parents: Interaction, Expectations, and Communication.
		Beliefs, implementation, and support techniques for play-based learning.
		The outcomes: For parent's relationships or confidence and children learning development.
4. Comparison and Synthesis	Compare and analyse multiple studies.	Identify patterns, as well as inconsistencies, and recurring themes such as disrupted leadership and parent's presumptions play-based learning, Parental Involvement.

Note: The steps followed during the systematic literature review's thematic analysis are outlined in this table. A systematic process for data extraction, management, and analysis was followed in the theme analysis. Although modified for a literature review, the methodology was based on Mutch's (2013) guidelines for organising and analysing qualitative research data.

2.1.6.9 *Conclusion of the Chapter*

The search strategy, which included the PRISMA flowchart one as well as two (the phases two and three), theme analysis, and narrower keyword searches, worked well for methodically searching and assessing pertinent articles. The realised methodology used specific keywords and improved inclusion strategy, even if the initial approach depended on general search terms. As a result, a number of papers that closely matched the objectives of the study of the literature review.

This systematic search method made it clear how important it is to alter and carefully reassess methodological methods to ensure the literature review's accuracy as well as usefulness. The subsequent chapters expand upon this structure, literature related to the leadership role, communication, and parent participation are explored in part one of chapter three. In chapter four the second part two of literature review, play-based education for early childhood education is explored using systematic search method.

Chapter Three

The Leadership Role, Distributed Leadership and Parental Engagement

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the dynamic and intricate function of leadership in early childhood education (ECE), with a particular emphasis on how ECE leaders affect family involvement and communication in the context of evolving cultural norms and educational standards. The chapter promotes Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, as a model that incorporates family engagement, bicultural values, and children's holistic development, drawing on both international literature and the New Zealand context. Beyond teaching, leadership in ECE now includes complex relational, administrative, and community-based duties (Douglass, 2019; Kelton & Tenis, 2024; Nicholson et al., 2018). Maintaining high-quality programmes and creating inclusive, culturally sensitive environments that improve relationships with families depend heavily on effective ECE leadership.

Effective early childhood education leadership involves a wide range of leadership duties, such as mentoring, community involvement, administrative and pedagogical duties, and participatory decision-making. The development of child-centred cultures based on trust, reflection, and cooperation is another aspect of leadership in ECE that goes beyond staff management (Kivunja, 2015). Studies emphasise how staff development, curricular quality, communication with families, and community relationships are all interconnected aspects of ECE leadership that work together to create effective learning environments (Kelton & Tenis, 2024; Nicholson et al., 2018; Wood & Hedges, 2024).

To meet the demands of various stakeholders, policy requirements, and educational goals, leaders must strike a balance between their administrative and relational duties. The interrelated areas of ECE leadership, such as staff development, community relationships, curriculum quality, and parental communication. Distributed leadership encourages educators to work together and share accountability, but it still requires formal leadership for effectiveness. Those in positions have positional titles, such as head educators or centre managers, who are responsible for setting strategic direction, ensuring that policies are adhered to, and supporting staff, are referred to as formal leaders.

However, merely having a title is not enough. Leadership associated with these roles includes having clear objectives, the ability to motivate and coach people, as well as the interpersonal skills required to foster trust and open communication (Thornton, 2019). Building on this, Youngs (2020) highlights that formal leaders along with the varied contributions of members of a team with the overall objectives of an educational setting must still intentionally organise and encourage distributed leadership. Distributed leadership runs the danger of becoming disjointed or ineffectual in the absence of this intentionality. Therefore, the effectiveness of distributed leadership in early childhood education depends on formal leadership that provides guidance and interpersonal support.

Effective leadership in early childhood education requires comprehension of relational and ethical obligations that promote family involvement as well as inclusive education (Nicholson et al., 2018). In a similar vein, Kelton and Tenis (2024) stress that professional development that prepares ECE leaders to strike a balance between culturally sensitive family participation and leadership in education is essential. Douglass (2019) emphasises leaders who engage in ongoing professional development are better equipped to design inclusive learning environments that cater to the various needs of families and children.

3.2 An Overview of Early Childhood Education Leadership

Early Childhood Education (ECE) leadership has changed significantly as organisational, educational, and cultural expectations have changed. The function of the ECE leader, which has its roots in teaching practice, has grown to include a variety of duties, such as managing the office, providing pedagogical advice, and cultivating relationships with the community (Douglass, 2019; Kelton & Tenis, 2024).This shift necessitates a dynamic and all-encompassing strategy for leadership, one that supports staff professional development, builds trusting, reciprocal connections with families and communities, and fosters children's learning (Nicholson et al., 2018).

As stated by Wood and Hedges (2024), ECE leaders face a challenge in the contemporary educational setting navigating the conflicts between local cultural expectations and global policy discourses. Neoliberal values like school readiness, quantifiable learning outcomes, and standardisation across early childhood systems are frequently promoted in global policy discussions (Kamenarac et al., 2023).

Early childhood education is frequently linked to economic objectives instead of holistic development because these discourses are ingrained in frameworks that place a higher priority on accountability, efficiency, as well as data-driven performance (Wood & Hedges, 2024). Such international pressures have resulted in curriculum modifications in both England and New Zealand, which put pressure on teachers to exhibit specific performance criteria (Kamenarac et al., 2023; Moss, 2018).

However, local community values, languages, and pedagogies, especially those of indigenous and culturally varied populations, may clash with these universalised standards, marginalising contextually based learning strategies. Therefore, in addition to implementing curricula, ECE leaders must promote welcoming, culturally sustaining, and reflective educational practices that represent the various identities of the children and families they serve (Wood & Hedges, 2024).

National policies and professional standards in New Zealand reflect these evolving aspirations (Thornton,2019). Each of the pillars of the updated Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) incorporate leadership considerations, albeit they typically place more emphasis on kaiako[4]-enacted educational leadership rather than official positional leadership (Ministry of Education, 2017). Thornton (2019) contends this may lead to "mixed messages about who might enact leadership and the nature of those leadership actions" (p. 34).

Thornton (2019) argues leadership standards are now ingrained in ECE practice at all levels, supporting a distributed paradigm in which positional leadership roles are not the only place for leadership. The New Zealand Teaching Council's code of professional responsibility, and standards for the teaching profession, state that all teachers must exhibit leadership in their respective fields of responsibility, lends additional credence (Education Council, 2017). When taken collectively, these standards highlight the profession's shared accountability of leadership in practice and point to an evolution toward shared leadership. Such a relational, diffused approach to leadership is consistent with commonly recognised ECE leadership definitions that place an emphasis on purpose and influence. Kivunja (2015) defines leadership as “the ability to influence others towards the achievement of goals that contribute to a worthwhile purpose” (p. 396). Two essential elements are highlighted in this definition: influence and deliberate goal-setting. These elements are especially relevant in educational settings, since leadership is essentially about facilitating change.

Educational leadership, especially in early childhood education, involves more than merely promoting change. It entails managing intricate relational dynamics, promoting professional learning, and creating inclusive, moral, and culturally sensitive settings. ECE leadership. According to Heikkinen et al. (2024), it involves enacting professional accountability through deliberate pedagogical direction and collaboration, not only attaining achievement goals. This viewpoint emphasises how educational leadership

[4] Teacher(s)

differs qualitatively from generic leadership because it is firmly rooted in people, values, and context. The significance of leadership in ECE is highlighted by research that links it to the quality of early childhood programmes (for example, Ballaschk et al., 2024; Douglass, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Based on the findings of the research, leadership plays a critical role in maintaining the quality of early childhood education by managing tensions between conflicting expectations such professional development, cultural sensitivity, and accountability (Ballaschk et al., 2024; Douglass, 2019; OECD, 2019). Effective leaders create inclusive, values-driven environments with meaningful experiences for children, rather than concentrating only on compliance. This highlights the conflict between child-centred, holistic strategies that put children's development and well-being first and neoliberal priorities that emphasise measurable outcomes and effectiveness. Leadership is positioned as a platform where these opposing views on "quality" are negotiated.

Therefore, some viewpoints argue that organisational components outside of leadership, such financial schemes, legislative frameworks, and community involvement, can also influence quality and could limit the role of leaders (Douglass, 2019). In addition, there are a few limitations in the referenced studies. For instance, Douglass (2019) only included 12 early childhood centres in one urban area in their research. This limited the generalisability of the results. Similarly, the leadership techniques of a small group of high-performing centres were also studied by Ballaschk et al. (2024), which might not accurately represent the experiences of centres with various resources or cultural contexts.

Leadership may have a direct impact on the standard of early childhood programmes, which underscores the importance of leadership in early childhood education. Effective leadership supports high-quality provision by fostering successful family participation, culturally sensitive settings, and stimulating interactions between educators and children. In New Zealand, Cooper (2025) highlights the significance of culturally rooted leadership for upholding Pacific identities and encouraging inclusive behaviours. Similarly, a German study by Ballaschk et al. (2024) discovered that the entire

effectiveness of ECE depends on leadership, which is defined by initiative, teamwork, encouragement, and foresight.

ECE leadership, however, has often been marginalised in wider discussions on educational leadership. Despite its importance, early childhood education leadership frequently receives less attention than primary and secondary school leadership. For instance, in a Norwegian study, Bøe and Kristiansen (2024) demonstrate that ECE centre leaders typically receive less financing, professional respect, and policy support than school leaders in primary or secondary schools. Early childhood education leaders face increasing responsibilities without the equal support given to school leaders, who frequently have more resources, and formal training.

In New Zealand, Cooper (2025) highlights the way prevailing policy and leadership narratives, which frequently prioritise Western leadership paradigms, undervalue indigenous as well as culturally responsive strategies for leadership. Similarly, in their study of ECE centres in Germany, Ballaschk et al. (2024) discovered that while head teachers are essential to quality improvement through reflective practice and team building, their leadership efforts are not always formally recognised or sufficiently supported. ECE leaders make significant efforts to enhance quality and respect culture, but they frequently go unacknowledged, unfunded, and unsupported based on the combining the research of Ballaschk et al. (2024), Bøe and Kristiansen (2024) and Cooper (2025).

Hence, leadership in the early childhood sector is not merely a small matter; rather, it is essential to provide children with a quality, inclusive education. The creation of inclusive cultures which place an emphasis on open communication, sensitivity to culture, as well as active parental involvement in children's educational learnings is essential to reaching this goal. Effective ECE leaders view leadership as an interpersonal relational practice that is implemented through consistent communication, group decision-making, and building solid, trustworthy bonds with parents (Kivunja, 2015).

Developing inclusive cultures that respect clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and close family involvement in children's educational journeys is a crucial responsibility of effective ECE leaders (Kivunja, 2015). In this situation, leadership is viewed as a relational practice rather than just a position of authority that is carried out by consistent communication, group decision-making, and a dedication to forming solid, trust-based relationships with whānau (Dayman et al., 2024). To further illustrate the critical role that leadership plays in creating comprehensive, community-focused early childhood settings, the following sections in this literature review will explore the ways that ECE leadership promotes family relationships and engaging parent communication.

3.3 The Role of ECE Leadership

Reforms emphasising decentralised governance, more responsibility, and higher expectations for collaborative practices have significantly changed the leadership of early childhood education (ECE) in some nations (Heikkinen et al., 2024; OECD, 2025). For instance, decentralised approaches have been used in Sweden and Norway, where municipalities oversee the provision of early childhood education.

This enables leaders to customise services to meet the requirements of the community. Both Australia and New Zealand have implemented accountability systems that include frequent checks, evaluation tools, and quality standards (Heikkinen et al., 2024) such as National Quality Standard and Assessment and Rating process in Australia, and ERO evaluations and licensing criteria in New Zealand.

To improve inclusive practices, countries like the Netherlands and Canada have concentrated on strengthening collaboration between local agencies, families, and educators (Lindsay, 2024). Reducing educational disparities and enhancing the quality as well as responsiveness of early childhood education systems are the goals of these changes (OECD, 2025). Despite this change, distributed leadership which stresses shared decision-making and collaborating professionalism in ECE settings, has become more widely acknowledged (Heikka et al., 2013; Kivunja, 2015).

Effective ECE leadership affects team contentment, educational quality, and the holistic development of children in addition to the day-to-day operations of early childhood education centres (Kivunja, 2015). Similar patterns can be seen in other countries that place a strong priority on inclusive and high-quality early childhood provision, even if these reforms are more prominent in the Nordic countries of Norway and Sweden, as well as other nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Netherlands (Cooper, 2025).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), for instance, encourages collaborative strategies for leadership that improve child-centred education and culturally responsive pedagogy, and is closely related to leadership in early childhood centres. This demonstrates a shift from hierarchical systems to distributed as well as pedagogical leadership, where educators and leaders collaborate to produce knowledge and share decision-making responsibilities (Thornton, 2019).

In Australia and New Zealand, the most frequently carried out aspects of their jobs include managing and supervising staff, communicating with parents and other professionals, helping with staff development, managing finances, and planning centre activities (Colmer et al., 2014; Thornton, 2019).Notably, many of these roles are maintenance focused instead of innovation or pedagogical development-focused. This distribution of responsibility raises the possibility of a leadership capability deficit for advancing educational reform.

Similar concerns have been raised in New Zealand, where culturally responsive leadership practices run the risk of being overshadowed by managerial demands (Cooper, 2025) and Finland, where team leaders frequently find themselves overburdened with operational responsibilities at the expense of strategic leadership (Ranta et al., 2023).This is consistent with global evidence that shows that good ECE leadership improves staff morale, develops professional skills, and fosters conditions where children can flourish (Douglass, 2019).

3.3.1 Organisational Management and Participatory Leadership

Early childhood education organisations globally are adopting participatory leadership models increasingly in response to the demands for openness, equity, and cooperation as well as the growing organisational complexity. This change can be seen in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, Australia, and New Zealand, where early childhood education leaders are being asked to embrace leadership styles that prioritise collaborative decision-making, teamwork, and divided responsibility (Douglass, 2019; Heikka et al., 2013; OECD, 2019). Effective leaders in early childhood education address these needs by fostering settings that encourage knowledgeable and cooperative practice. For instance, using participative leadership techniques, headteachers in Germany have been demonstrated to be crucial in promoting team growth and quality enhancement (Ballaschk et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, ECE teachers in Finland state that good team leadership fosters a sense of shared accountability and staff development (Ranta et al., 2023). Thornton (2019) highlights the significance of distributed leadership as well as collaborative decision-making in establishing inclusive and responsive early childhood education settings in the context of New Zealand. ECE leaders promote ongoing learning and shared accountability by giving their teams sufficient time, resources, and accessibility to professional literature in all these circumstances.

In early childhood education, research from a variety of international contexts emphasise the significance of participatory leadership. A study by Douglass (2019) shows how effective ECE leadership in the United Kingdom requires empowering teachers, creating collaborative learning environments, and encouraging collaborative ownership of pedagogical decisions. Douglass' (2019) study is based on long-term case studies of early childhood settings across the United Kingdom, where it has been demonstrated that distributed leadership techniques promote long-term gains in teaching quality and improve professional development. Similarly, team leadership is essential to the day-to-day functioning of early childhood centres in Finland (Ranta et al., 2023).

Effective team leaders, according to Finnish educators, are those who uphold transparency, encourage psychological safety, and establish clear objectives all essential elements of participative leadership. Comparable to this, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) which promotes collaborative, culturally sensitive leadership that permits knowledge co-construction and shared pedagogical inquiry, has an impact on ECE leadership in New Zealand (Thornton, 2019). According to Douglass (2019) there has also been a trend toward diffused or spread leadership within early childhood settings in the United Kingdom. This trend is consistent with global changes in ECE leadership that place an emphasis on relational practice, shared accountability, and cooperation.

Since shared leadership approaches encourage creativity, professional development, and pedagogical advancement, their importance in early childhood education and education in general is becoming more widely recognised (Douglass, 2019; Youngs, 2020). Nonetheless, many early childhood education leaders continue to be occupied with administrative and operational duties, which can hinder their capacity to participate fully with pedagogical leadership (Thornton, 2019).

3.3.2 Building Relationships and Engaging the Community

In Australian early childhood education, community involvement is a critical component of leadership. Effective ECE leaders must establish and maintain meaningful relationships with communities and families in to manage expectations from parents and create inclusive, supportive learning environments (Kivunja, 2015). A recent Australian study supports this leadership role. For example, Murray et al. (2024) offer empirical evidence that family engagement and educator wellbeing remain top goals in early childhood education settings.

To support children's growth and improve educators' professional wellbeing, Kivunja (2015) and Murray et al. (2024) stress the value of ongoing collaboration between parents and educators. When taken as a whole, these findings show that early childhood

education leaders in Australia have critically needed to meet the accountability standard of putting community involvement first. These relationships are essential for creating a welcoming and encouraging learning environment as well as for managing parental expectations. Effective relationship building is essential to ECE leadership.

In the context of New Zealand, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) provides a practical and theoretical structure for comprehending leadership that is based on relationships. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), represents Māori worldviews and beliefs. It encourages a comprehensive approach to growth by acknowledging the relationships among individuals, locations, and experiences. The "whāriki"[5] metaphor illustrates how children's learning is not isolated but rather woven together by social, cultural, and relational strands.

Therefore, ECE leadership in New Zealand is not just administrative or instructional; it is essentially relational. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises that children flourish in settings where communities, educators, and whānau have relationships rooted in their culture. Dayman et al. (2024) support this by emphasising how Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) confirms that the best social circumstances for children's learning are ones that are courteous and responsive. According to Dayman et al.'s (2024) critical literature review, on Māori and early childhood education leadership, culturally inclusive leadership styles that respect mana and cultivate whanaungatanga[6] have a major positive impact on learning outcomes and the wellness of the community.

By incorporating principles that are culturally sensitive and community-oriented, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) counteracts global trends toward performativity and standardisation. It restates the importance of relational networks in leadership and instruction (Wood & Hedges, 2024). ECE leaders in New Zealand are therefore able to ensure cultural values, ambitions, and traditions are observed in day-to-day practice if they actively foster links with whānau as well as local communities. Metaphors in early

[5] Woven Mat

[6] kinship, sense of whānau connection – a relationship through shared experiences and working together that provides people with a sense of belonging

childhood such as the "woven mat" represent a quality paradigm based on collaboration and interdependence rather than official regulatory control (Fenech et al., 2020). In contrast to hierarchical, top-down methods, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) promotes distributed and participatory leadership styles where leadership is shared, and decision-making is inclusive (Dayman et al., 2024).

3.3.3 Pedagogical and Administrative Leadership

A dual emphasis on administrative and educational duties is another aspect of ECE leadership (Douglass, 2019; OECD, 2019). Financial management, hiring, regulatory compliance, and strategy planning are examples of administrative duties. On the other hand, pedagogical leadership entails supervising curriculum implementation, mentoring teachers, directing professional development, and cultivating a reflective practice culture (Douglass, 2019). Pedagogical leadership is concerned with creating and advancing meaningful learning opportunities that enhance children's social, emotional, and physical development (Kivunja, 2015).

In addition to having a thorough understanding of teaching and learning, this type of leadership also requires the interpersonal abilities needed to inspire and assist teaching teams. It is essential to guaranteeing that effective teaching methods are included throughout every aspect of the educational setting. Studies such as Heikka et al. (2021) and Kivunja (2015), indicate that pedagogical leadership plays a major role in raising the standard of early childhood education services.

Kivunja (2015) contends that pedagogical leaders play a crucial role in establishing a centre’s educational vision and helping staff members come to a common understanding of the goals of the curriculum. Research by Heikka et al. (2021) emphasise how pedagogical leadership enhances teachers' ability to analyse and engage with their teaching methods and promotes collaborative learning cultures.

Furthermore, leadership in early childhood education needs to be seen as an additional practice needing specialised knowledge, ethical dedication, and reflective practice, (Heikkinen et al., 2024). According to their study, the overall quality of educational settings improves when early childhood education leaders are acknowledged as professional with a defined mandate and career development routes.

This highlights the significance for professional identity in positions of leadership. To assist leaders in handling the intricate demands of their positions, the study also emphasises the necessity of leadership education that incorporates educational, ethical, and administrative competencies.

The range of duties that a ECE leadership position entails, from strategic planning and administrative supervision to community involvement and educational counselling, demonstrate how challenging this position can be. A study by Douglass (2019) shows ECE leaders play a crucial role in creating the framework required to provide high-quality education. Children's educational experiences and general well-being are directly impacted by their pedagogical knowledge, professional competence, and interpersonal skills.

For early childhood education centres to run well and maintain their quality over time, effective leadership is necessary. The leaders who are most effective are those who can establish cooperative, child-centred environments while juggling administrative duties and educational leadership (Douglass, 2019). These leaders guide systemic change and enhance educational outcomes by inspiring as well as managing (Douglass, 2019; Kivunja, 2015).

3.3.4 Multidimensional Roles and Responsibilities

Douglass (2019) highlights the need for flexibility in early childhood education leadership, arguing that leaders frequently take on the roles of general manager, coordinator, and mentor all at once. In a conceptual literature-based study carried out in Australia, Kivunja (2015) describes early childhood education leaders as major stakeholders in educational reform, policy makers, pedagogical developers, and advocates for children's rights.

These numerous tasks, which represent the broad and intricate nature of the position, include hiring staff, mentoring, curriculum leadership, developing policies, and advocating for the welfare of children. This multidimensionality is still being emphasised by recent research such as Heikkinen et al. (2024) and Lindsay (2024) using both conceptual as well as empirical frameworks.

In a qualitative narrative study conducted in Finland, Heikkinen et al. (2024) examined 20 written testimonies from early childhood education centre leaders and distinguished four different narratives of leadership professionalism. They made the case that leadership need to be acknowledged as a profession that calls for administrative, pedagogical, and ethical skills. Lindsay (2024) highlights the emotional as well as relational pressures imposed on early childhood education leaders by emphasising the importance of relational relationships and trust in research and practice through a thoughtful conceptual analysis in the Australian setting.

In a Finnish study, Heikka (2023) employed an observational "shadowing" methodology to examine the real-time dynamics of educational leadership, illuminating the situational and dynamic demands that leaders encounter on a daily basis. Ballaschk et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative empirical study in Germany that involved interviews with 22 head teachers who were involved in a nationwide quality improvement programme. Ballaschk et al. (2024) findings highlight how important leadership is for fostering team growth, encouraging cooperation, and raising the quality of education.

All of these studies show that early childhood education leadership is not a single function, but rather a complex practice that calls for leaders to adjust to a variety of demands in dynamic early childhood settings by adjusting to pedagogical, managerial, relational, and emotional differences. These demands are illustrated in figure 5.

Figure 5

Multidimensional Roles and Responsibilities of (ECE) professionals' diagram

Note. The diagram's tilt highlights how early childhood education professionals' duties and responsibilities are dynamic rather than hierarchical. Contrasting to a conventional top-down structure, the slant implies mobility, balance, and constant communication between diverse functions. This perspective emphasises how educators usually move flexibly from managing, promoting, collaborating, teaching, and providing care, reflecting the intricate and connected aspects of their profession.

3.4 Distributed Leadership

By reorienting the emphasis from individual power to the interactions and common practices of several stakeholders, distributed leadership reinterprets conventional ideas of leadership in educational settings (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Instead of being limited to positional titles, it views leadership as a practice-based, group activity that is performed across roles (Douglass, 2019).

Although distributed leadership can improve teamwork, career advancement, and academic results, its efficacy depends on positional leadership, organisational structures, and a common professional culture (Douglass, 2019; Heikka & Hujala, 2013). The transformational qualities of distributed leadership might not be realised in the absence of these resources (Douglass, 2019; Heikka & Hujala, 2013). In essence, distributed leadership views leadership being a dynamic process that is shared by all actors in an organisation, challenging hierarchical organisations (Heikka & Hujala, 2013).

3.4.1 Conceptualising Distributed Leadership

Heikka and Hujala (2013), emphasise influence above positional power and conceptualise it as driven by action rather than role-bound. This viewpoint supports that of Youngs (2020) who contends that distributed leadership needs to be interpreted as relationally enacted and culturally located, especially in educational settings that prioritise moral behavior and cultural sensitivity.

Collectively, these academics support the notion that distributed leadership depends more on cooperative relationships, trust, and a common goal than it does on formal frameworks. Expanding on these perspectives, distributed leadership may support holistic development in a range of learning environments, aligning with systemic approaches to school enhancement (Douglass, 2019). Academic results are simply one aspect of holistic growth; other aspects include improvements in organisational learning, professional ability, relationship trust, and child development.

In her study conducted in the United States, Douglass (2019) discovered that when educators shared leadership, it promoted ownership as well as reflective practice, and cooperative problem-solving, which enhanced the quality of education and outcomes for children. This is consistent with research conducted in New Zealand by Thornton (2019) which shows how distributed leadership in early childhood education creates professional identity, promotes curricular responsiveness, and increases educators' involvement in pedagogical decision-making. These cooperative frameworks enable moral and culturally sensitive leadership approaches that prioritise the needs of communities and children.

Collectively, the studies by Douglass (2019) and Thornton (2019) demonstrate how distributed leadership promotes holistic development by tying enhanced child learning and wellness outcomes to professional empowerment. Distributed leadership is readily understood as an adaptable conceptual framework which can be interpreted and utilised differently depending on the situation, rather than as a rigid or prescriptive model.

Drawing from international literature, Harris (2009) a writer from the United Kingdom, offers a conceptual synthesis regarding distributed leadership, emphasising the values of cooperation, interdependence, and professional growth. Although dispersed leadership is marketed as an adaptable and inclusive paradigm, her theoretical research contends that it is frequently influenced by preexisting hierarchies and perceived in contradictory ways.

3.4.2 Distributed Leadership Criticisms

Despite its inclusive goals, distributed leadership does have some criticism. Through a lens of sociocultural theory, Hartley (2009) provides a conceptual critique on distributed leadership. According to his analysis of the literature on educational policy, distributed leadership models frequently fall short in challenging underlying power dynamics. He warns that these approaches might just restructure hierarchies in the name of cooperation, which could lead to unequal distribution of power and autonomy and the marginalisation of certain voices or roles.

Bolden (2011) who carried out a literature review of more than 100 studies from both public and private education settings, supports this viewpoint. His analysis shows that although distributed leadership is sometimes hailed for its collaborative principles, structural injustices, role uncertainty, and conventional leadership standards frequently limit its actual implication. Building on these criticisms, Bolden et al. (2011) contend that leadership is inextricably linked to its socio-organisational setting, pointing out that in cases where leadership is nominally shared, power is usually still held by individuals in formal positions of leadership.

Adding to this, Youngs (2020) highlights how culture, organisational principles, and professional relationships impact distributed leadership. His analytical synthesis of distributed leadership literature highlights how, if positional hierarchies and contextual elements are not taken into account, rhetorical assertions of distribution might conceal inequities.

Furthermore, a mixed-methods study by Heikkinen et al. (2024) that looks at leadership as a profession in early childhood education settings provides empirical evidence from Finland. In addition to qualitative narratives from a few chosen Finnish municipalities, their research included a nationwide poll of 552 ECE leaders. The results underscore the conflict in distributed leadership ideals such as systemic realities, demonstrating that leadership is unevenly executed and duties are frequently fragmented, resulting in the marginalisation of certain staff. When taken as a whole, these many sources highlight the importance of critically analysing distributed leadership tactics, especially when it comes to equality, voice, and professional agency.

These criticisms highlight the risk of implementing distributed leadership models carelessly, but they also highlight the circumstances under which they might be effective. ECE leadership is a complex, multi-professional process based on reciprocal influence and a common goal (Heikkinen et al., 2024). In this perspective, leadership is presented as a cooperative activity that is supported by organisational structures and professional standards that promote progress and well-being. Their findings provide credence to the notion that effective distributed leadership requires a culture of trust, respect, and institutional involvement. Leaders must actively contribute to the development of moral and inclusive leadership cultures which promote equal participation and cooperation to create such a setting.

3.4.3 Distributed Leadership in Early Childhood Education

The field of early childhood education (ECE) offers an intriguing setting for investigating distributed leadership. As defined by Ranta et al. (2023) ECE leadership is naturally distributed, with educators exercising leadership in accordance with their professional skills. This is a result of the collaborative teaching teams, flat hierarchies, as well as the emphasis on shared pedagogical responsibility that are common in early childhood education settings. Flat hierarchies, where collaborative curricular leadership and reflective practice are made possible when leadership is shared among teams rather than governed by positional structures (Thornton, 2019).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) promotes this approach by advancing the values of community, relationships, empowerment, and holistic development. According to the Ministry of Education (2017) these guidelines urge everyone kaiako to participate in curriculum development and implementation and in directing the learning of children.

In their research of an early childhood centre in Singapore, Yang and Lim (2013) explored the distribution of educational leadership among leaders and educators to promote quality improvement using semi-structured interviews as well as document analysis. They demonstrate how teacher-led decision-making, shared curriculum ownership, as well as cooperative planning were used to implement dispersed pedagogical leadership. Heikka (2023) provides examples of strategies like planning meetings and team agreements, which promote reflective thinking and shared ownership, operationalise distributed pedagogical leadership.

3.4.4 The Significance of the ECE Context in Distributed Leadership

A dispersed culture is fostered by leaders who provide an example of cooperation and mentoring (Thornton, 2019). In a similar vein, Colmer et al. (2014) show that although involvement is important, leaders must exercise effective leadership to establish supportive environments. Additionally, Thornton (2005) contends that leaders need to provide genuine leadership opportunities and actively cultivate relational trust.

Therefore, the deliberate dispersion of leadership practices through inclusive and strategic action, rather than the lack of hierarchy, defines distributed leadership in ECE. In Thornton's (2019) review of ECE leadership research, she emphasises on leadership in early childhood education, distributed leadership requires deliberate cultivation through professional communication and relational trust rather than just flattening hierarchies.

To meet the varied and changing demands of educational communities, Thornton (2019) contends that effective distributed leadership in early childhood education is inclusive and dynamic, depending on mutual respect, shared influence, and active participation. Instead of depending just on official positions, leadership needs to be demonstrated through cooperative partnerships and bolstered by a culture that recognises the contributions of every kaiako. Her findings emphasise the need for leadership approaches to be based on relational, ethical, as well as reflective processes which empower educators and encourage shared accountability for educational decisions.

By encouraging cooperation, shared accountability, and career advancement, distributed leadership presents a substitute for conventional top-down leadership approaches. Its effectiveness is not assured, nevertheless. The interaction with organisational infrastructure, professional culture that emphasises teamwork, and formal leadership is necessary to realise its advantages. Colmer et al. (2014) emphasise that if context, dynamics of power, and the deliberate development of leadership have

not been properly taken into account, distributed leadership may not reach its full transformative potential. Their qualitative case study involving three Australian early childhood centres revealed that although leadership was nominally shared, issues with role clarity, accountability, and the possibility of covert hierarchies continuing to exist underlying cooperative systems persisted. The study of Colmer et al. (2014) made clear that rather than being taken for granted, leadership needs to be actively developed and contextually sensitive. Future research and applications need to keep looking into how leadership could be shared without reducing accountability or reintroducing covert hierarchies that go against the dispersed leadership philosophy.

3.5 The Significance of Parental Participation in Early Childhood Development

Early parental participation has been repeatedly linked to children's successful learning and socioemotional development. A study by Lindsay (2024) shows providing high-quality early children programmes requires fostering relational involvement and interpersonal trust. The findings highlight how crucial it is for parents and ECE professionals to have cooperative connections, especially when those relationships promote valuable educational opportunities at home and facilitate successful communication. There is evidence that parental involvement enhances school preparedness and promotes greater social adaptability. Furthermore, the educational level of parents has a considerable impact on the developmental outcomes of their children (OECD, 2019). Higher educated parents are more likely to assist their children in their early social, emotional, and cognitive development, foster responsive communication, and establish stimulating home learning environments.

Additionally, they frequently have greater confidence when it comes to getting resources for support and taking part in their child's educational journey. Therefore, ECE professionals must strive to empower and support families, especially those from various educational backgrounds, by establishing trustworthy connections and offering advice on early learning techniques that may be used at home, in addition to offering high-quality programs (OECD, 2019).

3.5.1 Barriers to Interaction with Parents of Different Ethnicities

The creation of fair and inclusive relationships between early childhood education professionals as well as parents from various cultural backgrounds remains challenge in both Europe and New Zealand. Indigenous families in New Zealand frequently deal with educational systems that fail to accurately represent their lived realities or cultural values (Matapo, 2021) and immigrant families in Europe continue to face persistent educational disadvantages despite widespread commitments in policy to inclusion (Passaretta & Skopek, 2018). In all situations, relational, cultural, and systemic hurdles prevent ECE professionals from forming deep ties with families.

Working with families that are multicultural and linguistically diverse is a daily requirement for Early Childhood Education professionals throughout Europe, necessitating reflective practice and increased cultural competency (Norheim & Moser, 2020). The importance of this with ECE professionals is becoming more widely acknowledged (Norheim & Moser, 2020). However, the research by Norheim and Moser (2020) shows that relationships between immigrant parents and educators can be difficult, especially when those encounters are influenced by presumptions rooted in prevailing Western norms. Even though these types of relationships are common, little is known about the elements that affect partnerships with immigrant families.

The cultural mismatch among professionals and families is one of the main contributing factors. Studies reveal differences in the perceptions and practices of parental participation who come from different nations (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018). Immigrant families must deal with misalignments brought on by differences in teacher responsibilities, philosophy of education, and expectations for participation and communication, frequently without ECE centre assistance or clear advice (Norheim & Moser, 2020). The challenges that immigrant families have in early childhood education settings are further complicated by socioeconomic inequality, which is another recognised barrier to parental engagement in addition to linguistic and cultural hurdles (Calzada et al., 2015; Liu, Zhang, & Jiang, 2020; Norheim & Moser, 2020).

Similar to this, Māori families in New Zealand have long advocated for educational methods that take into account the lived realities and modes of knowing of Māori children (Skerrett & Ritchie, 2021).The establishment of culturally grounded education is demonstrated by the founding and continued leadership of Kōhanga Reo, where indigenous leadership, rangatiratanga[7] and Māori language revitalisation are all ingrained in early childhood practice. Skerrett and Ritchie's (2021) study analyses the practice of Te Rangatiratanga o te Reo, or language sovereignty, in relation to early childhood education. Critical indigenous scholarship, policy analysis, and Māori knowledge are all incorporated in their theoretical and discursive work. The authors draw on their professional expertise in kaupapa Māori study and Māori-led early childhood education contexts to remark on historically and contemporary narratives rather than offering new empirical data. According to their research, Kōhanga Reo is a place of indigenous leadership and cultural resistance that opposes colonisation of systems and upholds Māori educational leadership.

However, indigenous, as well as other non-Western leadership models are not fully incorporated into mainstream ECE contexts. These frameworks provide alternatives to European leadership models that place emphasis on hierarchy and individualism because they are firmly rooted in tradition of whanaungatanga, community, as well as holistic well-being (Dayman et al., 2024).

Despite their importance, these indigenous frameworks are usually tokenised or devalued rather than incorporated into teaching philosophy and leadership practices, revealing the colonial structures' ongoing influence on early childhood education leadership (Woods et al., 2023).To ensure all children, especially those who are straddling several cultural worlds, can thrive in early childhood settings which accurately represent their identities as well as lived experiences, such transformation is required. Additionally, it is a critical step in promoting wellness and attaining equitable education for all children navigating diverse cultural contexts (Cooper, 2025; Norheim & Moser, 2020).

[7] Chiefly authority, right to exercise authority, sovereignty, autonomy, leadership, control, independence

This trend of marginalisation, whether of indigenous epistemologies in New Zealand or immigrant voices in Europe, suggests a larger systemic problem; the predominance of Eurocentric participation and leadership models that do not take into account the lived realities of culturally varied families. The ability of ECE systems to effectively address the needs of families whose perspectives diverge from the prevailing culture is hampered by the lack of cultural grounded leadership approaches and values (Cooper, 2025; Norheim & Moser, 2020).

Therefore, it is essential to look into how ECE professionals experience leadership and partnership in early learning settings. ECE leaders can start to break down educational obstacles and cultivate reciprocal relationships between families by emphasising indigenous as well as culturally responsive approaches and values. This includes acknowledging the importance of Pasifika language nest approaches in New Zealand. These are based on Pacific indigenous philosophies that place an emphasis on relationality, communal identity, and the importance of language as a cultural medium (Matapo, 2021).

Matapo's (2021) doctoral thesis used a qualitative research strategy based on Pacific and indigenous approaches, including talanoa and kaupapa Māori. Matapo (2021) used narrative inquiry to interact with leaders, educators, and members of the Pasifika community in New Zealand who represent a variety of Pacific ethnic groups. Rich, contextualised narratives and viewpoints that highlight the connections between indigenous philosophy as well as Pasifika educational practices were acquired for the exploratory interpretive study. The focus of this study was Pasifika Indigenous knowledge in the context of educational leadership and early childhood education.

Based on Matapo (2021), Pasifika language nest approaches are culturally embedded in early childhood settings that place a high priority on the preservation and dissemination of indigenous ideologies and Pasifika languages. Through daily interactions, storytelling, cultural customs, and group participation, these nests provide immersive settings where young Pasifika children acquire their ancestral languages. According to Matapo (2021) these methods anchored in Pacific indigenous perspectives that place a high importance

on spirituality, collective identity, and va[8], creating a comprehensive framework for education and wellbeing.

The language nest approach is a response to the challenges that many Pasifika people in New Zealand face, including loss of language and cultural alienation. Pasifika children and their families share knowledge across generations through these nests, enhancing cultural continuity and bolstering children's sense of self. This emphasises Pasifika epistemologies and beliefs within curriculum design as well as leadership practices. Matapo's (2021) research highlights how these culturally responsive pedagogies replace prevailing Western educational paradigms.

For Pasifika children to thrive in early learning environments that respect and represent their distinct cultural realities, this culturally based approach is crucial. This change is necessary to ensure that all children, particularly those who are straddling various cultural worlds, can flourish in early childhood settings that accurately reflect their identities along with circumstances. It is also important for educational equity (Cooper, 2025; Norheim & Moser, 2020).

3.6 Conclusion: Implications for ECE Centres when weaving together role, distributed leadership and parental engagement

3.6.1 Establishing Environments That Are Culturally Appropriate

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) is an example of a framework that is sensitive to cultural differences. A study by Fenech et al. (2020) discusses how curriculum uses a metaphor to characterise education as a whāriki, made up of strands and principles that represent the cultural background of each learning situation. In New Zealand, the strands, which include mana reo[9], mana aotūroa[10], mana tangata[11], mana whenua[12], and

[8] Relationality
[9] Communication
[10] Exploration
[11] Contribution
[12] Belonging

mana atua[13], are made to fit the various identities as well as lived experiences of each child (Ministry of Education, 2017).

For Pacific and Māori children, the mat metaphor is very appropriate. It represents an educational setting where their identities, languages, and cultural values are not only acknowledged but also integrated into the curriculum. Rather than being seen with a through deficit lens, Māori as well Pacific children are viewed as competent, culturally grounded children.

To support them, the mat embraces indigenous and Pacific perspectives, acknowledges whānau and aiga[14], and incorporates spoken language traditions, storytelling, and communal values. This method guarantees their contributions are acknowledged, their languages are recognised, and their cultural methods of knowing are acknowledged (Skerrett & Ritchie 2021). By doing this, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) contributes to the development of inclusive, powerful, and identity-affirming educational settings.

3.6.2 Holistic Development and Integrated Services

Parental involvement can be increased by ECE leaders working with larger community services like the health, social welfare, and family support sectors. Leaders promote the continuity as well as comprehensiveness of developmental services by establishing cross-sector collaborations, which results in a more unified system of care that gives parents confidence and assistance outside of school (OECD, 2019).

However, because of disjointed services along with segmented operations that may jeopardise support networks necessary for maintaining parental involvement in children's development, reaching this level of integrated collaboration is still difficult globally, as well as in countries such as the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK (OECD, 2019).

[13] Wellbeing
[14] whānau or extended family

Fenech et al. (2020) in an Australian comparative study highlights the challenge of preserving standards in early childhood education systems if frameworks such as Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) are metaphorically employed to support family-centred, holistic approaches but are compromised by disjointed policy and service structures. According to their findings, this type of fragmentation can make it more difficult for parents and educators in nations like Australia as well as New Zealand to build cooperative partnerships.

Chan and Ritchie (2016) also critique the frequently flimsy implementation of partnership discourse in early childhood education, with a particular focus on the New Zealand context. Despite Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) encouraging parental involvement and collaboration, their research revealed that parents, especially those who come from culturally diverse backgrounds, can be marginalised by institutional constraints, power disparities, and prevailing discourses of professionalism. They contend that a more thorough examination of parents' perspectives, cultural expertise, and lived experiences is necessary for a true collaboration.

Collectively, these studies show that structural fragmentation as well as hierarchical practices can hinder the interpersonal and inclusive goals of early childhood education, even in the face of governmental objectives. The next chapter explores the importance of play-based learning to help to understand how play may be employed. It explores its main advantages, theoretical underpinnings, and the roles that children and their parents play in putting it into practice. It also considers the rights of children, the effects of digital technology, and the ways in which play in early childhood settings can promote inclusive, developmentally appropriate behaviours.

Chapter Four

Play-Based Learning and Parental Expectations

4.1 Introduction to Play in Early Childhood Education

In early childhood education, play is not just a leisure activity. Play is a crucial and mandatory element that supports children's overall development, despite it being a possible contentious and difficult term (McLean et al., 2022). Its acknowledged educational usefulness should not be diminished by this ambiguity. Despite definitional disputes, researchers, like McLean et al. (2022) repeatedly support developmental benefits of play.

Research findings, indicate that a child's cognitive, emotional, social, as well as physical development is greatly supported by play (Heang et al., 2021). Children from underrepresented or disadvantaged communities, who might already have limited opportunities for high-quality, play-based learning environments run the risk of being further marginalised if play is minimised or excluded from early learning settings. This is in addition to neglecting the way that young children may make sense of the world through play (Heang et al., 2021).

4.2 Definition of Play and Play-Based Learning

Play-based education is an approach, which incorporates deliberate learning objectives into play activities, so that children can discover and build knowledge in fun and meaningful ways. Despite, their frequent interchangeability, play and play-based learning are two distinct, but connected ideas (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play is widely acknowledged as a child-centred, naturally driven activity that promotes holistic development (Weisberg et al., 2013). Pyle and Danniels (2017) highlights the many levels of adult involvement in promoting learning through play, by characterising play-based

education as a continuum that includes teacher-guided play, collaborative play, and child-directed play.

4.2.1 Conceptualising Play in Play-Based Learning

Play is considered to be the most crucial component of a child's development (Lungu & Matafwali,2020). Play is conceptualised as well as defined, in various manners, based on the ideological and theoretical lens by which it is seen. Play is sometimes defined using a variety of attributes, including being meaningful, joyous, engaged, iterative, symbolic, and socially interactive, but there is no single, widely recognised description of what play is (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

Lungu and Matafwali (2020) for instance, emphasise play's intrinsic motivation and developmental importance by defining it as "an activity that is symbolic, meaningful, active, pleasurable, voluntary, fun, and engaging" (p.356). A child-centred perspective on play, whereby the process is valued above any predetermined results, is reflected in this definition.

Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) contend that because play is so context-dependent and impacted by social, cultural, and educational elements, it is difficult to define or classify. Their study emphasises the close relationship between pedagogy and play-based learning, as well as the need of comprehending play's place in early childhood education. Rather than presuming a universal or set definition, Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) argue that debates should concentrate on how play is interpreted and used pedagogically.

Some definitions emphasise the intrinsic characteristics of play, while others contend for a more complex and contextualised understanding. This argument emphasises how difficult it is to define play-based learning and how crucial it is to look at the ways in which play is incorporated into educational frameworks and practices. Although definitions of play vary, most people agree that it is important for children to have this basic right.

4.2.2 Types of Play

In early childhood education, an understanding of the various forms of play is crucial to promoting children's learning and development. While play is frequently thought of as a spontaneous and natural activity, research shows that when educators recognise and purposefully structure play, it can be a powerful pedagogical tool that supports academic and developmental objectives (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) define play is a varied and complex experience that includes a variety of forms, including role-play, imaginative play, heuristics play, constructive play, socio-dramatic play, free play, structured play, fantasy play, and rough-and-tumble play. These types of play provide various developmental advantages and learning possibilities, demonstrating the need for educators to be deliberate in their planning and facilitation of play-based learning (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

The findings of an early pilot experiment by Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) examined whether children could identify the information incorporated into environmental education experiences that were given through unstructured play lend more credence to their claim. A pedagogy play framework was developed as a result of the study, highlighting that not all forms of play are equally good at fostering learning if they are directed by specific educational goals. Three educational play forms were recognised by the authors as supporting children's comprehension of challenging content, particularly in the setting of environmental education such as:

- open-ended play, in which children actively explore sustainability-related elements with little assistance from teachers;
- modelled play, in which educators show or describe the objects before letting children use them on their own; and,
- purposefully structured play that extends learning by combining intentional teacher-child interaction with unstructured modelling and exploration.

(Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013)

The assumption that every form of play is essentially educational is called into question by this methodical approach. Instead, it makes the argument for striking a balance between teacher-led and child-led activities to maximise learning.

Lungu and Matafwali (2020) divide play into six developmental stages, unoccupied, solo, observer, parallel, cooperative and associative play. This provides more evidence that play is complex to understand. These categories emphasise how children's social connections change as they play and imply that educators need to identify and encourage socially and developmentally appropriate play.

In addition, Mtonga (1988) categorises play into distinct activities such language games, dancing and singing, role-playing, and ball games. These variations support the claim that play is an intentional activity that may be used to promote cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development rather than being an unplanned activity. Further, Pyle and Danniels (2017) support a play-based learning strategy that incorporates academic and developmental goals. They contend that play becomes a dynamic and successful way to impart curricular content when it is organised to incorporate both unplanned child-led activities and deliberate teaching strategies.

The perspectives in these studies highlight the importance of play in education. The findings are difficult to generalise because a large portion of the research, such as the pilot study conducted by Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013), relies on small or

particular groups. In addition, many research studies (for example, Mtonga (1988) and Lungu and Matafwali (2020)) have diverse classifications and descriptions of play, indicating that context and culture influence how play is seen. These variations highlight the need for more thorough comparative research that takes into consideration a variety of educational environments and perspectives.

4.2.3 Children's Right to Play

The right to play is still not fully experienced in numerous early childhood education settings, despite its broad global acceptance. This underscores the ongoing discrepancy between policy and practice. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), play is a fundamental right that is necessary for a child's overall development rather than just being a recreational activity.

A study by Singh and Ngadni (2023) shows how play is essential to children's cognitive, emotional, physical and social, development and is not just a teaching strategy. Additionally, through meaningful, vigorous, and developmentally appropriate interactions, play helps children make sense of the world around them (Singh & Ngadni, 2023). This right is expressly guaranteed by Article 31 of the UNCRC, which reiterates that children's wellbeing is closely related to their capacity to play freely (Singh & Ngadni, 2023; United Nations, 1989). The United States National Association for the Education of Young Children, state how play is essential to Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), and "joyful, play-driven, and strength-based" are the requirements for successful early education (NAEYC, 2020, p. 5).

However, these aspirations may not align with practice. Research indicates a persistent preference for organised, formal education over child-led, play-based learning in Malaysia, where DAP serves as the theoretical basis for preschool teachers (Singh & Ngadni, 2023; Tee & Mariani, 2018). The child's right to play and, consequently, their right to the best possible development is compromised by this discrepancy between required pedagogical techniques and realised classroom practices.

Globally, there are counter examples from progressive models like the Nordic region. For example, by ensuring children have the freedom to voice their opinions during everyday activities, the Norwegian Preschool Act emphasises the value of child agency (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). Since communication goes beyond spoken language, educators are taught to be sensitive to children's various forms of expression, whether they be artistic, verbal, or physical (Bae, 2009). In line with the rights-based educational concept, this method does more than just respect children's voices; it also presents them as capable, engaged learners (Bae, 2009).

Play can be incorporated as a democratic practice and a developmental mechanism, as demonstrated by this Nordic social educational approach. On the other hand, settings such as Greek-Cypriot preschools have been constrained by educational paradigms that are outcome-oriented. The research of Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) shows that meaningful play is usually disregarded despite changes in policy, which diminishes children's autonomy and restricts their ability to express themselves authentically. Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) argue that play should be reframed as a democratic engagement tool as well as a developmental activity, allowing children to engage in decision-making through play. By embracing this viewpoint, preschools might be democratic settings where the rights of children are actively upheld rather than only acknowledged. Furthermore, according to Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) creative play integration in education is crucial for the UNCRC to be authentically realised, guaranteeing that children feel heard, seen, and valued in their day-to-day experiences. Even though national frameworks and international accords are increasingly reaffirming children's right to play, there are still obstacles in bringing practice and aspiration into alignment.

Despite Singh and Ngadni (2023), Tee and Mariani (2018), and Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) providing valuable perspectives, their findings are grounded in particular situations and may not be applicable to all educational systems. This is due to aspects such as limited numbers of samples, localised case studies and culturally specific teaching methods. Other points of view that influence how children's rights to play are

implemented, such as the influence of laws, testing requirements, or economic and social contexts, should also be taken into consideration. This shows the importance of carefully analysing both the findings of research and the circumstances surrounding how the studies were conducted.

4.2.4 The Importance of Play-Based Learning

Play is an essential part of the development and learning of children and should not be seen as a hobby or elective activity in preschool settings (McLean et al., 2022). There is little dispute regarding play's critical function in promoting early learning, even though its definition has long been disputed by academics (McLean et al., 2022). The many philosophical and pedagogical arguments in favour of play are highlighted by the works of foundational theorists like Froebel (child-led play), Pestalozzi (the distinct interests of children), Rousseau (child-centred play), Piaget (stages of play development), Comenius (the natural ability of children to learn), Locke (the influence of social settings on how children learn),Vygotsky (using play as a guide) and Montessori (voluntary play). From child-led and experiential learning to its developmental and sociocultural significance, each of these theorists emphasise distinct aspects of play, supporting the claim that play is essential to early childhood education rather than be an afterthought (Roopnarine, 2012).

This perspective is still reflected in modern conceptions of play, which present it as a normal and necessary form of education (Edwards, 2021) that helps children make sense of their experiences and environment (McLean et al., 2022). Specifically, play is positioned as culturally created and environmentally influenced by the sociocultural theory based on Vygotsky's (1976) work, highlighting its essential role in childhood (Whitebread et al., 2017).

It is challenging for educators and caregivers to recognise and encourage this smooth integration because play and learning are arguably so closely related that children themselves frequently fail to see the difference between the two (McLean et al., 2022).

Furthermore, play is a dynamic and adaptable learning approach due to its diversity, which includes games with rules as well as physical and symbolic play (Whitebread et al., 2017). Critical competencies such as social-emotional control, cognitive flexibility, acquiring a language, physical coordination, and academic preparedness are all developed by each form of games (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013). However, the implementation of play and potential influence can be jeopardised if significant adults, such as parent's, educator's, and legislator's understandings of play do not match this information. The transforming impact of play runs the risk of being lessened in children's everyday experiences if its value is not widely acknowledged (McLean et al., 2022).

Significantly, play helps children develop their personalities by simulating real-life scenarios and helping them acquire social norms and values like tolerance, empathy and honesty (Tekman & Yeniasır, 2023). Piaget asserts that play promotes social awareness and problem-solving skills by lowering egocentrism and facilitating the integration of environmental inputs into preexisting cognitive structures. At the same time, play improves motor skills, which supports overall physical development (Tekman & Yeniasır, 2023). Additionally, free play fosters psychological development by enabling children to express their creativity, discover their identities, and exercise autonomy skills that are essential for self-confidence and lifelong education (Tekman & Yeniasır, 2023).

These findings provide evidence for the benefits of play-based learning. However, many of the studies that are included used limited context-specific sampling or localised settings. The findings may not be as widely applicable as they might be. Exploring many perspectives and accounting for educational, cultural, including policy inequalities may provide a fuller understanding of play's role in early childhood education. This may also point out areas that need further study.

4.2.5 A Theoretical Framework of Play-based Learning

According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, play-based education is a basic and successful strategy for promoting children's social interaction and cognitive development. Most of the perceptual development observed in preschool education over the past few decades has been based on Vygotsky's (1967) work. According to his socio-cultural theory, development in humans is a socially mediated process through which children engage with more seasoned members of society to gain cultural norms, perceptions, and analytical abilities.

The claim that play-based education, which entails social contact and teamwork by nature, is crucial to children's intellectual development is directly supported by this theoretical viewpoint of Vygotsky (1967). Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of culturally appropriate tools that influence social and private communication in addition to children's active participation in the learning process. Vygotsky's theories emphasise the importance of social interaction in intellectual development through engagement since he was a strong believer in the community's crucial role in meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). This implies that social situations, such those discovered in play-based settings, are firmly ingrained in cognitive development rather than being a solitary individual process (Alam, 2022).

This sociocultural viewpoint is also present in the context of New Zealand. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) views education as a process of mutually beneficial connections in socially and culturally mediated situations. In line with Vygotsky's theory that social interaction and shared experiences are essential for meaning-making and cognitive development, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) places a strong emphasis on how children's learning and development are fostered through responsive interactions with parents, peers as well as the environment.

Children's development requires an environment that is both socially and emotionally active, which is provided by play-based learning. Alam (2022) emphasises how children acquire culturally entrenched intellectual skills through social contact, helps in forming their cognitive processes. In this manner, play-based learning is an appropriate environment for promoting these developmental adaptations, particularly when it incorporates peer collaboration and guided inquiry.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the difference between what children can accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish with adult supervision or cooperation from more experienced peers, is a key idea in Vygotsky's theory (Alam, 2022). Therefore, in addition to being consistent with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, play-based learning is a crucial strategy for achieving the potential he outlines in the ZPD.

Piaget asserts that play promotes social awareness and problem-solving skills by lowering egocentrism and facilitating the integration of environmental inputs into preexisting cognitive structures. At the same time, play improves motor skills, which support overall physical development (Tekman & Yeniasır, 2023). These qualities enable teachers to incorporate curricular content into enjoyable activities, turning play into a deliberate teaching strategy (Ali et al., 2018). Therefore, play must be acknowledged as an efficient and long-lasting way to support early childhood social, emotional, cognitive, as well as physical development rather than being marginalised or seen as a secondary activity to formal education (Ali et al., 2018).

4.2.6 Benefits of Play-Based Learning

Children can develop significantly through play-based learning, particularly as a means for improving their capacity for creative thought and problem-solving (Heang et al., 2021). Children have to organise tasks, designate characters to act out the roles, and use problem-solving techniques like searching for materials and props to fulfil a play objective. In addition to cultivating the focus, engagement, reflection, and participation qualities that are thought to be critical to learning, this active engagement in challenging activities develops planning and organisational abilities (Heang et al., 2021).

Play has been shown to promote reading and language readiness in the literacy domain. For instance, four-year-olds started playing rhyming games, creating shopping lists, and "reading" storybooks to stuffed animals, they improved their phonological awareness and language skills when they started preschool (Heang et al., 2021). The fundamental abilities required for the development of literacy are supplied by these engaging interactions. These results demonstrate that play may be a potent pedagogical tool for developing the fundamental abilities needed for reading and writing, not only a leisure activity.

Furthermore, preschool is where children pick up a significant amount of their vocabulary, and a play-based learning environments inherently promote conversational interactions, which enhance language acquisition (Alam, 2022). By allowing children to explore with language, internalise conversation, as well as recount their experiences, even solitary play can help them build their communication skills. Therefore, it is not only appropriate for development but also a calculated move to support early reading and language readiness to include play in early childhood education.

Play helps in the development of early mathematical knowledge. By encouraging children's everyday interactions with mathematical ideas like more and less, taking away, size, shape, location, pattern, and measurement, play establishes the groundwork for logical mathematical thinking (Ginsburg et al., 2012). In the absence of formal adult

guidance, this mathematical knowledge frequently emerges organically as part of cognitive development (Alam, 2022; Ginsburg et al., 2012).

Children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development are all facilitated by play. Children progress through increasingly complicated developmental stages as they establish rules, assume different roles, and regulate their behaviour in play scenarios (Heang et al., 2021). This active participation fosters self-control, judgment, and flexibility skills essential for lifelong learning. Additionally, artistic endeavours like sketching, painting, sculpting, or scribbling are not only pastimes; they are essential tools for expressing emotions and creativity.

4.2.7 Integrating Digital Technology into Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood

Miller (2018) highlights that incorporating technology in early childhood education, particularly in play-based learning contexts, is essential. The integration of technology is a natural progression that fits with children's cultural and educational experiences, as they are growing up surrounded by digital settings. This perspective is supported by Panjeti-Madan and Ranganathan (2023) who point out that interactive iPads and other accessible digital devices have revolutionised early childhood education settings because of their user-friendly and intuitive designs.

This shift is consistent with theories of sociocultural learning. Bittner et al. (2018) claim that children interact with their environment through cultural tools, which are becoming more digital. Technology thus turns into a contemporary extension of those cultural tools, influencing how children view, comprehend, and engage with their environment.

It is clear how ubiquitous technology is in children's lives. For instance, a study by Panjeti-Madan and Ranganathan (2023) gathered the types of, frequency, and time of parental usage of media. According to the study's analysis, 40.7% of the babies in the present sample were exposed to several technological devices before the age of 12

months, and approximately 47% of infants been exposed to mobile devices before the age of 18 months (between 7 and 18 months). Less than one-third of children use portable computers, iPods, gaming systems, and other media devices, but almost 60% of them used smartphones and tablets. Thirty percent of children utilised Skype for video contact, and half (51%) used technologies to watch movies and videos. Less than 25%, in contrast, used technology to learn (reading books).

Similar patterns in the previous decade, have been noted in nations like Australia (Rhodes, 2017) and France (Cristia & Siedl, 2015) suggesting a global trend of early and extensive digital exposure. Through regular involvement, this early digital device use may help children develop their literate identities and foster emergent digital literacy (Harrison & McTavish, 2018; Marsh et al., 2017).

Despite these findings, some educators continue to be skeptical about the use of technology, for play in early childhood settings (Edwards, 2016). Lawrence (2018) points out that issues frequently revolve around the type of digital information that is accessible, with detractors claiming that some applications (apps) might encourage rivalry or hyperactivity; qualities that run counter to the collaborative and exploratory character of play-based learning. However as explained by Edwards et al. (2017) these critiques usually ignore the complex ways in which children use technology at home and in the classroom. The way technology is presented and integrated into learning experiences, rather than its existence, is the main problem.

The educational benefits of deliberate and controlled use of technology in play-based environments are being bolstered by further research. For example, it has been demonstrated that tablets improve motivation, promote self-directed learning, and facilitate small-group cooperation all essential components of successful play-based education (Miller, 2018). As noted by Tekman and Yeniasır (2023) gamification-infused digital environments have also been shown to boost engagement and enhance reading comprehension for English as a Second Language learners. Children's innate need to learn by play is catered to by these engaging and game-like experiences, which makes technology an effective tool for increasing engagement and development of skills.

Ultimately, any marginalising of technology in early childhood classrooms could be a failure to recognise its important contribution to children's modern experiences and growth (Bittner et al., 2018; Harrison & McTavish, 2018). Play-based learning may be strengthened and supported by digital play when combined with appropriate pedagogical techniques emphasised by Tekman and Yeniasır (2023).

4.3 Parents Participation and Expectations

4.3.1 Parents Participation in Early Childhood Education

The importance of parental involvement in early childhood education has been widely accepted (Ekinci-Vural & Dogan-Altun, 2021; Sobri et al., 2022). Several studies have shown that parental participation has positive impacts on children's development and there are connections between the type of parent involvement and children's social-emotional and academic achievement (Kurtulmus, 2016; Ma et al., 2016). The participation of parents in their children's schooling is central to parental involvement (Ekinci-Vural & Dogan-Altun, 2021). Preschool-based activities and consistent communication with teachers are two aspects of this participation that have been shown to have a major impact on young children's education as well as development (Kurniawan & Nurbaiti, 2024; Sobri et al., 2022).

Some examples of parent participation strategies are attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in class visits, and helping with classroom activities (Kurtulmus, 2016). Furthermore, in New Zealand, it is also evident in Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) that early childhood educators have an ethical responsibility to engage with families in an equitable and inclusive ways of parent participation (Chan, 2019).

Parenting responsibilities include encouraging educational activities that foster academic performance and taking ownership of learning outcomes (Kurtulmus, 2016). In early childhood education, this frequently focuses on supporting the language as well as literacy development of the children. Reading to children at home is one of the most recommended activities (Sobri et al., 2022). According to research, children who have parents reading to them on a daily basis are more likely to be able to write their own names at earlier ages as well as recognise the alphabet's letters (Ma et al., 2016). Therefore, parental participation is found to be important in fostering children's academic success and sense of competency (Ekinci-Vural & Dogan-Altun, 2021; Kurniawan & Nurbaiti, 2024; Ma et al., 2016). The relationship between parental participation levels and children's outcomes continues to be explored in studies on parental involvement because of its significance for child development (Kurtulmus, 2016).

4.3.2 Parent Expectations on Academic vs Play based learning in Singapore: A contextual example

In the context of Singapore, the NEL (Nurturing Early Learners) framework is Singapore's first official preschool education framework (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2022).
It identifies best practices for education and teaching and places an emphasis on children's holistic development, rather than just academic school preparedness (Tan, 2017).

The NEL Framework has six learning areas such as Aesthetics and Creative Expression, Language and Literacy, Discovery of the World, Motor Skills Development, Numeracy, as well as Social and Emotional Development to ensure the children's complete development (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2022).Through careful design and facilitation of the intentional play activities, preschools are encouraged to assist children develop the knowledge, skills, and mental models that are specific to each of these learning areas (Karuppiah, 2022).

Some early childhood leaders and educators point to parents as a major challenge, stating that parents prioritise academic skill acquisition. Parents do not encourage play-based learning, which involves building knowledge through interactions with the physical and social environment (Karuppiah, 2022). Additionally, Lim-Ratnam (2013) thinks that a significant focus on academic skills in preschools and schools is a result of the stresses of Singapore's high-stakes examination system. Because of that, parents are now expecting preschools to use drill-and-practice and rote learning to get their children academically ready for primary school. For example, teaching them how to read, write, spell, and count as well as how to add and subtract (Bach & Christensen, 2017).

Many Asian parents, particularly those from Singapore, still place a high priority on getting their children mentally ready for primary school as soon as possible. Despite of a wealth of studies, on the value of play in early childhood (Karuppiah, 2022). Parents believe that this will improve their children's chances of success in school, the workplace, and life in general (Karuppiah, 2022).

Therefore, parents place their children under excessive stress and pressure, enrol them in various enrichment and tuition classes (Bach & Christensen, 2017; Tan, 2017). Similar tension has been seen in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2025) as well as Malaysia (Singh & Ngadni, 2023).This tension draws attention to a difference in perspectives, many parents believe that academic preparation is the most important objective of early childhood education, whereas educators and frameworks support play as crucial to holistic development such as Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the NEL framework (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2022).

Parents' high expectations and demands for academic success, as well as their lack of understanding about the value of play in children's development, may be contributing factors to the lack of parental support for their children's play.

4.3.3 Children's Participation

Early childhood education (ECE) relies heavily on children's engagement, which is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and acknowledges their rights. In both early childhood and school contexts, these rights serve as the cornerstone for establishing pedagogical quality. The 1989 Convention signalled a significant change towards a legal framework which supports children as right-holders, in contrast to earlier declarations that mainly concentrated on the moral need to care for and meet the needs of children.

It emphasises the need to acknowledge children as active participants with the capacity for independence, in addition to protecting them as vulnerable individuals. The duty of educators to value and encourage children's voices as well as participation in educational settings is emphasised by the legal framework of rights (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

This idea is further supported by Shier (2001) who distinguishes between different levels of engagement, ranging from just letting children voice their opinions to including them in decision-making. This range of involvement demonstrates the many levels of agency that children are given in educational settings. Significantly, it becomes clear that children can exercise their participatory rights most effectively through play. In a study by O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) children expressed their thoughts about play scenarios, negotiate roles and resources, make decisions alone or with others, and encounter shared power dynamics with adults and peers through play.

A high degree of participation is shown by this autonomy in play, which places children in a position where they are both learners and co-creators of their education environments. However, the level to which play promotes genuine engagement is not assured; rather, it is heavily reliant on the adults' contribution. Bae (2009) highlights the variation in adult facilitation, pointing out that depending on adult engagement, interactional spaces can be either expansive or constrained. In a similar vein, Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) stress that teacher intentions, planning, and educational objectives

frequently determine children's participation. Accordingly, adults have a major say in whether children get involved or just participate in a tokenistic manner.

Therefore, educators must consciously design inclusive and responsive environments for learning if they are to respect children's participatory rights. This is corroborated by Johansson and Sandberg (2010) who state that "to have the ability as an adult to take children's perspective is a prerequisite for children's real participation" (p.232). In addition to being a teaching strategy, this perspective-taking is a professional and ethical obligation that affirms children's experiences and points of view. Children have been more likely to believe their opinions count when adults are able to effectively listen to and understand their viewpoints. In a study by Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) this type of responsiveness was shown to improve the pedagogical relevancy of educational programmes while also confirming children as significant participants. Therefore, being heard is only one aspect of participation; another is having a significant impact on one's surroundings.

Furthermore, studies support the crucial role adults play in identifying, analysing, and fostering children's interests while they play (Loizou & Avgitidou, 2014). Hedges (2010) emphasises how crucial it is to acknowledge the various knowledge bases that children contribute from their unofficial experiences and incorporate them into the educational process. Children are positioned as capable learners and their cultural as well as experiential backgrounds are validated by this acknowledgment.

Thus, both unstructured and planned play are essential areas where engagement and education are combined. But as Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) point out, the attitudes and behaviours of ECE professionals have a big impact on how much children's participation is achieved. The ability of teachers to actively listen to children's viewpoints can either promote or limit chances for children to participate in play. The same can be said regarding parents. Early childhood education (ECE) relies heavily on children's engagement, which is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and acknowledges their rights. In both early childhood and school contexts, these rights serve as the cornerstone for establishing pedagogical quality.

Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) stress that teacher intentions, planning, and educational objectives frequently determine children's participation, as well as being able to take a child's perspective.

In addition to being a teaching strategy, this perspective-taking is a professional and ethical obligation that affirms children's experiences and points of view. In a study by Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) this type of responsiveness was shown to improve the pedagogical relevancy of educational programmes while also confirming children as significant participants. Therefore, being heard is only one aspect of participation; another is having a significant impact on one's surroundings. Furthermore, studies support the crucial role adults play in identifying, analysing, and fostering children's interests while they play (Loizou & Avgitidou, 2014). Hedges (2010) emphasises how crucial it is to acknowledge the various knowledge bases that children contribute from their unofficial experiences and incorporate them into the educational process.

Children are positioned as capable learners and their cultural as well as experiential backgrounds are validated by this acknowledgment. Thus, both unstructured and planned play are essential areas where engagement and education are combined. But as Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) point out, the attitudes and behaviours of ECE professionals have a big impact on how much children's participation is achieved. The ability of teachers to actively listen to children's viewpoints can either promote or limit chances for children to participate in play. The same can be said regarding parents.

4.3.4 Educating Parents on Early Learning

Kivunja (2015) emphasise early childhood education leaders are in a good position to help parents in comprehending the importance of early childhood education by effectively conveying its objectives and methods. This obligation has increased as pedagogical standards have changed. A thorough explanation of the educational reasoning behind curriculum choices and classroom activities may help leaders

increase children's involvement in learning and cultivate more cooperative connections with families (Kivunja, 2015).

Parents are more likely to support continuity across settings by reinforcing learning at home when they comprehend what is being taught as well as why. This supports the OECD's (2019) findings that strong partnerships between educators and families improve the standard of early childhood education and have a positive impact on children's developmental outcomes.

In summary, play-based learning has several domains that have been discussed in this chapter (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Multiple Benefits of Play-based Learning (adapted from Alam, 2022)

This chapter has illustrated that play is not only fun but also an effective way to develop key abilities which sets children for school and relationships that are positive through their lives.

Chapter five

Parental Involvement and Leadership Challenges in the Implementation of Play-Based Learning

This chapter addresses the interplay between leadership, parental participation, and the use of play-based education in early childhood education (ECE). It looks critically at how leaders handle the challenges that come up while balancing parental expectations with educational priorities. The discussion expands on the main research question: *What does the early childhood education leadership research reveal about early childhood education leaders engaging with parents in the context of play-based learning?*

5.1 Early Childhood Education Leadership and Parents

5.1.1 *Rethinking Leadership Functions*

Kivunja (2015) provides a practical framework that distinguishes the numerous roles, as well as functions of early childhood education leaders, emphasising how connections are at the core of leadership and how it manifests itself in practice. He highlights that effective leaders are conversation starters, trust-builders, and cultural mediation qualities that are critical when collaborating with various families.

The research findings of Yang and Lim (2023) reveal that ECE leaders need to combine relational obligations with management demands, particularly when trying to increase parental engagement. Although not specifically addressing early childhood education, Youngs (2020) highlights the significance of relational and distributed leadership approaches, which are becoming increasingly important for ECE leaders juggling administrative and educational duties. Pedagogical and dispersed leadership approaches, when combined can enable teachers to share leadership responsibilities while preventing administrative demands from impeding effective relationships with families.

This dual role of relational and organisational leadership may lead to possible conflict at times. Leaders may find themselves trapped between the time needed to establish partnerships with families and operational responsibilities. However, as argued by Colmer et al. (2014), in early childhood education, teams can share and practice leadership instead of just positional leaders. Through the engagement of families by multiple educators, this distributive approach ensures that the administrative burden does not impede the formation of relationships.

5.1.2 *The Professional and Ethical Practice of Leadership*

The argument made by Heikkinen et al. (2024) is that leadership in ECE needs to be viewed as a profession within itself, requiring specific knowledge, ethical awareness, and contextual intelligence. Leaders need to receive training on relational practices that are sensitive to cultural differences in addition to curriculum and legal compliance. The capacity to lead with respect and empathy becomes essential when working with parents, particularly those from varied socioeconomic or linguistic backgrounds.

Similarly, Heikka (2023) demonstrates in his research on pedagogical leadership in Finland how shadowing or mentoring other teachers improves the centre's leadership capacity and the team's capacity to interact with families. This demonstrates how team-based leadership development is replacing individual power, allowing professional learning groups to jointly develop strategies that promote inclusive parental involvement.

5.1.3 *Social Justice, Leadership, and Power Relations*

Nicholson et al. (2018) urge ECE leaders to consider the epistemologies that support ECE leadership practice with clarity. They contend that effective leadership should clearly address concerns related to power, voice, and equity rather than focusing solely on efficiency or compliance. In terms of parental engagement, this entails understanding which perspectives are heard, which are marginalised, and how leadership may alleviate disparities rather than reinforce them.

In culturally diverse settings like New Zealand, where early childhood education leadership needs to actively interact with Māori and Pasifika perspectives, this is especially crucial. The tension that results when Western hierarchical leadership models marginalise, shared, relational, and culturally integrated approaches is shown by Dayman et al.'s (2024) critical analysis of Māori leadership in early childhood education. These spiritual, collective, and historical aspects of knowledge and connection must be acknowledged in leadership and research based on Pasifika relational ontologies, according to Matapo (2021) who also explored Pacific Indigenous philosophy.

Leaders need to be sensitive to the lived reality of the families they work with as well as the structural limitations. For leadership to be responsive, it must prioritise parent's goals, values, and experiences rather than merely asking them to take part in activities that have already been planned. In the research of Colmer et al. (2014) collaboration with families is a prerequisite for authentic leadership, as opposed to tokenistic dialogue The marginalisation of Indigenous and Pasifika methods of knowing and engaging by current models may also aggravate ambiguities surrounding roles, leadership, and parent communication. Leaders must develop reciprocal relationships with families and embrace contemplative, culturally sensitive methods that respect whānau and aiga values to grow these relationships.

5.1.4 *Relationships with Parents and Team-Based Leadership*

Head teachers who make investments in team building establish an environment of trust as well as professional assurance that permeates family involvement (Ballaschk et al., 2024). Teams are more inclined to take the initiative to forge relationships with parents when they feel supported and well-led.

This is expanded upon by Bøe and Kristiansen (2024) who demonstrate how networking leadership in Early Childhood Education contexts may be improved via "hall of mirrors" professional learning systems, in which leaders collaborate to reflect and challenge one another's presumptions. Biases can be addressed, deficit thinking about parents can be unpacked, and more equitable engagement tactics can result from this type of collaborative contemplation.

This is also related to Youngs (2020) who highlights that systems that foster cooperation, a shared objective, and inclusive ideals are essential for good educational leadership, which transcends charisma or personality. He contends that empowering team members through shared responsibility and trust improves organisational capacity and that leadership is an interpersonal and moral effort. Early childhood educators are more equipped to form enduring relationships with parents and convey the benefits of play-based learning when they are self-assured in their roles as pedagogical guides and relational mediators.

5.2 Early Childhood Education Leadership Challenges and Parental Expectations in Play -Based Learning

Parental resistance endures despite evidence confirming the developmental advantages of play-based learning, especially among parents who place a high value on academic success. While play is frequently considered to be merely relaxation, formal education is frequently perceived as the cornerstone of academic preparedness in nations such as Singapore (Karuppiah, 2022).

Similar conflicts between play-based pedagogy and parental expectations are present throughout the world, including in Zambia (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020), Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2025) and Bangladesh (Alam, 2022). This discrepancy poses a leadership issue for Early Childhood Education (ECE) leaders, who must strike a balance between promoting play-based learning and upholding cultural norms and family concerns.

Given that many parents from Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia as well as Bangladesh are still unaware of the intrinsic learning potential of play, Singh and Ngadni (2023) emphasise the importance of effective leaders in education in creating collaborative environments that raise parental awareness of play's educational significance. This demonstrates how important leadership is in closing knowledge gaps and altering perspectives.

A recent thorough analysis of the advantages and challenges associated with putting play-based learning into practice is presented by Haile and Ghirmai (2024). They support the well-known social, cognitive, and emotional benefits of play for children, but they also highlight challenges such insufficient training for educators a lack of resources, and opposition from communities and parents who are not aware of play's educational value. To overcome obstacles to successful play-based pedagogy, these insights highlight the necessity of leadership that promotes professional development, allocation of resources, and community participation.

Effectively integrating play-based lessons presents challenges for educators themselves, particularly when incorporating literacy into play. Pyle et al. (2018) highlight conflicts between adhering to curriculum requirements and maintaining child-led, inquiry-based contexts. Educators appreciate play, but they frequently have to make concessions due to limitations such as time constraints and assessment pressures (Heang et al., 2021). Educators can be empowered to successfully traverse these challenges through leadership that places a high priority on reflective practice and continual professional development.

Another complication is introduced by the growing use of digital devices in early childhood settings. Edwards (2016) and Bittner et al. (2018) warn against letting technology take the place of traditional play types, emphasising that technology should complement play-based learning rather than replace it. To ensure alignment with play-based principles, Edwards (2016) argues for new conceptual frameworks that guide the integration of digital media in an ethical and pedagogical approach.

In this case, it is the duty of ECE leaders to guide pedagogical and ethical decisions about the use of technology while providing training and direction to educators. For instance, Miller (2018) demonstrated how educators might employ interactive technology to improve play-based numeracy learning with the appropriate leadership support, highlighting the significance of early childhood education leaders in directing the innovations.

Pyle et al. (2017) also noted that there is a mismatch between public discourse, classroom practice, and academic research as a leadership problem. The quality of play-based learning is undermined when expectations and policies are unsynchronised, marginalising play in favour of measurable academic outcomes (Pyle et al., 2020). To promote play's legitimate place in early education, effective leadership entails cross-domain collaboration to integrate policy, research, and practice.

Chen et al. (2024) also highlight the significance of intention and active decision-making in learning through play. Their findings highlight the ways in which educators' deliberate play decisions promote more profound social and cognitive development. Connecting play with significant learning outcomes requires educator's participation. This highlights the leadership role in helping teachers acquire the pedagogical techniques and abilities necessary to make play meaningful and rich in education.

The findings discussed so far provide helpful insights on parental expectations and leadership challenges related to play-based learning. Their broader relevance across various cultural and educational contexts is limited by studies using small and localised samples (Pyle et al., 2018; Singh & Ngadni, 2023). To develop further understanding of the challenges involved, alternative viewpoints such as different interpretations of rights for children (Loizou & Avgitidou, 2014), different parental aspirations influenced by their socioeconomic background (Alam, 2022), or policy-driven constraints on school curriculum (Pyle et al., 2020) need to be taken into consideration.

5.2.1 *Leadership, Parents, and Play: A Woven Mat of Partnership*

Early childhood education leadership in New Zealand can be effectively conceptualised through the metaphor of Te Whāriki, or the woven mat. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) emphasises relational interaction, cultural responsiveness, and holistic development rather than merely being a curriculum content (Wood & Hedges, 2024). It opposes standardisation of curriculum in favour of inclusive, based approaches to leadership, education, and teaching.

Wood and Hedges (2024) rely on small and specific to the context samples, which would limit how broadly their findings can be applied outside of New Zealand. Similarly,

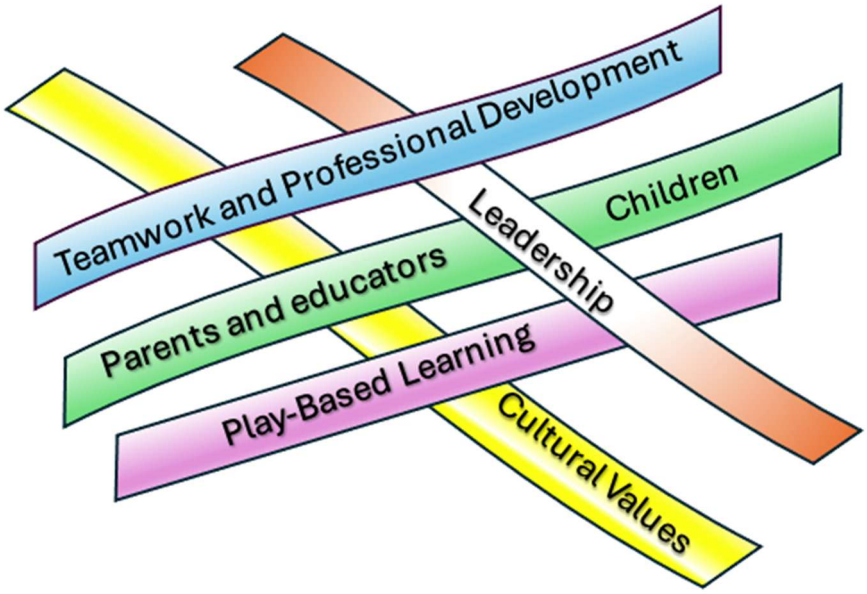
providing insightful policy information, multinational reports like the OECD (2025) might overlook local cultural factors and community objectives. Therefore, taking into account different viewpoints like indigenous epistemologies, parental narratives, along with community-driven approaches can offer a more critical and nuanced understanding of the ways in which play, parents, and leadership interact in various early childhood settings.

The metaphor of the woven mat represents community-based, collaborative, and adaptable leadership in which children, families, and educators co-create meaning and learning. In addition to discussing the advantages and disadvantages of various strategies, the studies previously discussed present an international view of ECE systems and offer policy recommendations that can support fair access to high-quality early childhood education. This emphasises the value of inclusive, trust-based leadership approaches that actively involve families and communities in the operations of early childhood education centres to tackle inequality.

Play-based learning, parent involvement, and leadership are all seen through this lens as interconnected components rather than separate activities (see Figure 7). Therefore, an effective early childhood education leader needs to be pedagogically grounded, relationally adept, and culturally sensitive. They must create inclusive settings that support the fundamental principles of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) which include connections, empowerment, holistic development, and family/community involvement.

Figure 7

The Woven Mat of Relational Binding Threads



The metaphor of the woven mat includes and goes beyond curriculum. It represents the type of leadership that is required in early childhood education one that is relationally grounded, ethically responsive, and sensitive to the changing patterns of collaborative work and play-based learning that characterise high-quality early childhood settings.

5.2.2 *Leadership as a Relational Binding Thread*

Drawing from Nicholson and Kroll (2015) and Nicholson et al. (2018) leadership in education isa socially responsive, relational, and inquiry-based process. Leadership develops through cooperative practice, mutual reflection, and moral interaction with the experiences of educators, families, and children rather than acting as a top-down directive. By emphasising relationship as well as reciprocity as the cornerstones of successful practice, this method upends conventional hierarchies.

As stated by Nicholson et al. (2018) leadership in early childhood education needs to be epistemologically based on relational ways of knowing, specifically addressing voice,

power, and equity. They support culturally rooted and morally aware leadership, especially when it comes to the inequalities that impact family engagement. Similarly, verbal inquiry is emphasised by Nicholson and Kroll (2015) as a way for early childhood educators to work together to analyse and solve practice challenges. Their work demonstrates how leadership develops through discussion and collaborative exploration, empowering educators to share the experiences of families and jointly develop inclusive and equitable approaches.

This conceptualisation is similar to the idea of Colmer et al. (2014) who contend that leadership in education is firmly rooted in cooperative, trust-based relationships rather than distinct from teaching or caregiving. In this context, effective leadership is about creating environments where different viewpoints particularly those of parents are respected and incorporated into the curriculum, rather than about exerting control or supervision.

Leadership as a "binding thread" is a metaphor that captures this inclusive and collaborative approach. This leadership paradigm acknowledges parents as co-constructor of knowledge who contribute crucial insights into their children's cultural backgrounds, values, and aspirations, as opposed to seeing them as passive supports. Families may actively influence the school setting when leaders take this position because they intentionally provide opportunities for collaborative decision-making and cultivate relational trust.

This concept is compatible with Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). The whāriki, or woven mat, represents a relational, culturally grounded, and adaptable education. In this framework, leadership serves as the unifying factor that ensures the various threads of children, parents, and educators are woven together with consideration, purpose, and respect for one another. The mat's power and integrity come from the interweaving of numerous voices, connections, and contributions rather than from the supremacy of any one thread.

This model advocates for a values-driven, inclusive, and dialogic style of leadership. In early childhood education, ethical as well as relational leadership entails promoting meaningful family engagement, opposing deficit perspectives, and cultivating shared pedagogical visions based on social justice (Nicholson et al., 2018). Relational leadership is based on ethical responsiveness (Thornton, 2019); it entails encouraging pedagogical discourse between educators and parents, listening intently, and standing up for parents' rights to meaningful participation. This type of leadership is essentially values-based and collaborative, with the goal of fostering inclusive behaviours and creating common visions.

The findings of Nicholson et al. (2018) and Nicholson and Kroll (2015) may not be fully generalisable to larger early childhood education systems. They are based on smaller, context-specific studies. Similarly, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) may not be readily transferable to other cultural or policy contexts, despite being a good framework for cultural responsiveness within New Zealand. Therefore, taking into account different viewpoints in comparative studies from different areas, parent-led experiences, or larger-scale empirical investigations may provide further insight of relational leadership across early childhood education.

5.2.3 *Parents as Learning Co-Weavers*

Drawing from Cooper (2025) relationships, group identity, and reverence for family wisdom are all important components of Pacific knowledge systems. ECE leaders are reminded by these cultural frameworks of the need of relational responsibility and the need to establish cultural norms that are consistent with families' real-life experiences. In this case, leadership needs to be sensitive to both curriculum outcomes and cultural stories that form every child's identity and perspective on their surroundings. A richer, more welcoming whāriki where each thread symbolises lived meaning is developed when parents are asked to contribute their narratives, languages, and values to the curriculum.

Parental engagement needs to go beyond tokenistic involvement, especially in play-based learning environments. Parents' perceptions of the quality in early childhood organisations are firmly rooted in the appearance of connections, trust, and inclusion, based on Fenech et al. (2020). Early childhood programmes are frequently assessed by parents based upon whether they feel accepted, listened, and respected throughout their child's educational journey rather than on compliance or official documents. This view forces leaders and service providers to rethink quality through a relational perspective, where family involvement is central to education rather than an afterthought.

Parental engagement needs to go beyond tokenistic involvement, especially in play-based learning environments The quality in early childhood education is viewed as a relational as well as contextual construct (Fenech et al., 2020). Teachers' actions frequently represent values like inclusion, connection, and trust elements that are likely to align with the expectations and perceptions of parents as well. Early childhood programmes are frequently assessed by parents based upon whether they feel accepted, listened, and respected throughout their child's educational journey rather than on compliance or official documents. This view encourages leaders and service providers to rethink quality through a relational perspective, where family involvement is central to education rather than an afterthought.

The bureaucratisation of early childhood programmes, where administrative and accountability pressures could replace possibilities for effective family engagement, is another concern brought up by Fenech et al. (2020). They propose a more relational and democratic approach where teachers are supported by leadership to have meaningful discussions with families, co-create learning objectives, and modify pedagogical approaches based on feedback from families. This viewpoint is in line with Lindsay's (2024) focus on the importance of trust as well as interpersonal connection as underlying values, rather than just environmental factors, in the provision of high-quality early childhood education.

To ensure true partnership instead of tokenistic involvement, early childhood education leaders must actively establish the processes and areas where parent's concerns are not only heard but also effectively acted upon. Leaders who support curriculum co-construction and include families in related decisions are exemplifying democratic involvement along with culturally responsive pedagogy, which promotes a more responsive and inclusive learning environment (Thornton, 2019).

Furthermore, it is essential to view the concept of leadership in this environment as emerging and shared. Ranta et al. (2023) explored how teachers' experiences of trust and cooperation influence team leader profiles in Finnish ECE contexts. Not unlike the relational leadership approach that promotes parent inclusion, these outcomes supported a vision for leadership which is distributed, contextually responsive, and dependent on strong interpersonal dynamics.

These studies emphasise the importance of distributed leadership, family involvement, and relational responsibilities. However, some studies (as discussed) are based on small-scale samples and come from specific cultural or geographical contexts, which may limit the findings' applicability to broader early childhood systems. Comparative viewpoints from various educational, cultural, and policy contexts may help to understand how parents might be involved as co-weavers of learning in a more authentic manner.

5.2.4 Play as The Thread of Learning

In accordance with Kivunja (2015) ECE leaders need to actively promote play as a valuable teaching method. This lobbying is especially important in situations where parents have more academic expectations, which are frequently influenced by cultural narratives which prioritise early literacy and numeracy above unstructured play. In such scenarios, leaders need to be adept at bridging the gap between developmentally appropriate practices and parental goals and expectations. Explaining the importance of play to families is not enough; it also calls for clear, understandable examples of how

play-based activities naturally foster important learning outcomes like mathematics, literacy, social-emotional development, and creativity.

Additionally, incorporating play-based education into leadership practice speaks to the professional identity as well as responsibility of leaders themselves and goes beyond curriculum design. As stated by Heikkinen et al. (2024), ECE leadership has to be viewed as a distinct profession with a foundation in educational knowledge and ethical commitment. Leaders who make play a core value strengthen their position as managers and champions for the rights and welfare of children.

This concept is further supported by Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) who explore reforms to education in Cyprus and position play as a child's fundamental right as well as a participative learning process. Leaders are challenged by the dual framing play as pedagogical and as a right to establish spaces where parents are welcomed as co-learners and children's opinions and choices are valued.

The effectiveness of play-based learning for development is further supported by empirical studies. Research by Khalil et al. (2022) and Ali et al. (2018) emphasise how play helps children to develop important social, emotional, and cognitive abilities. Crucially, these studies also show that educators benefit through professional development that improves their capacity to scaffold as well as interpret play in a meaningful way. Leadership can facilitate this capacity through modelling, mentorship, and reflective discussion.

5.3 Cultural Responsiveness and Relational Practice

Effective ECE leadership is a highly relational endeavour that goes beyond administrative responsibilities and structural frameworks (Thornton, 2019). Trust, empathy, and cultural safety are fundamental components that shape the provision of high-quality early childhood services rather than being add-ons (Lindsay, 2024). In multicultural and

diverse countries such as New Zealand, these interpersonal elements become more important.

ECE leaders need to recognise and respect the various ways families view learning, play, and childhood. Family attitudes and expectations are shaped by their linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds before they enter the ECE field. Pacific knowledge systems provide strong frameworks for maintaining cultural identities through principles like va, group accountability, and spiritual connectivity, as Cooper (2025) emphasises. Likewise, establishing culturally grounded partnerships requires adherence to Māori values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga [15].

The whāriki becomes a living document; one which reflects and honours the goals, convictions, and contributions of each strand in the learning community when leaders incorporate these values into their daily operations. Beyond a surface-level, dedication to diversity, culturally responsive leadership necessitates constant introspection, discussion, and a thorough understanding of the cultural settings of communities and families.

Building on Kivunja (2015) effective early childhood education leadership requires adopting a mindset that overcomes conventional, functional leadership positions and acknowledges diversity as a strength. Leaders must become cultural learners to support families, in areas such as play-based learning, by fostering environments where parents feel free to express their expectations, values as well as beliefs.

Engaging immigrant families highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness. In the evaluation of empirical data, Norheim and Moser (2020) pinpoint both challenges and factors that contribute to developing sincere relationships with parents who are immigrants. Professional attitudes characterised by cultural modesty, trust-building, and the establishment of participative spaces where relationships of power are flattened

[15] the process of showing respect, generosity, hospitality and care for others

serve as key factors. These findings highlight the value of relational leadership techniques that encourage meaningful engagement and shared.

Drawing on Devi (2022) provides a cultural-historical analysis of play in the home, demonstrating how play interpretations are intricately woven into social norms, family customs, and values. Leaders who comprehend these home-based viewpoints are better able to create culturally sensitive learning settings that celebrate diversity rather than obliterate it. Similarly, Lungu and Matafwali (2020) emphasise how Zambian educators' views on play impact its use in the classroom, putting leadership at the forefront of supporting reflective practice as well as responsive pedagogy.

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity needs to change to keep up with the rapidly changing digital environment. Traditional ideas of learning are challenged when digital media, technology and popular cultures are included into play (Edwards, 2016). To successfully negotiate these challenges, leaders must encourage candid discussions with families regarding the evolving nature of play as well as the various literacies that children encounter on a daily basis.

Fundamental to the whāriki, relationship building as well as cultural responsiveness are essential elements of ECE leadership. Every child and family will feel noticed, appreciated, and connected when leaders foster culturally lasting partnerships based on relational care and trust. The richness of the whāriki's weaving is its strength, and it is the leader's duty to make sure that every voice is weaved in with dignity, reciprocity, and purpose.

5.4 ECE Leaders’ Contribution to Fostering Parent Involvement

This section makes the point that early childhood educators play a critical role in encouraging parental participation, which benefits children’s development, education, and long-term wellbeing (Thornton, 2019). ECE leaders serve as intermediaries between families and school environments by implementing culturally sensitive pedagogy

(Thornton, 2019) including wraparound programmes that address social and educational issues (Douglass, 2019),and encourage open communication through inclusive methods that value the diversity of families (Clarkin-Phillips & Morrison, 2018). Learning outcomes, long-term welfare, and children's development are all greatly impacted by these leadership techniques.

This chapter shows how early childhood education (ECE) leadership involves parents in the framework of play-based learning, which directly answers the research question. The findings drawn from Chapters Three and Four focus on three interwoven themes: play-based learning, parent involvement, and leadership. These components interact dynamically to create inclusive and responsive Early Childhood Education settings rather than existing in a vacuum. Effective pedagogical practice is supported by a conceptual triad that includes play as the thread of learning, involvement of parents as contextual co-construction, and leadership through a relational binding thread.

Chapter six

Conclusion

Early childhood education centres must embrace play as a fundamental, rights-based, and democratic practice to effectively protect children's rights. Repositioning play in educational frameworks is not only pedagogically sound, but also morally and legally required, as evidenced by the examples from Norwegian Preschool Act and the advocacy of academics like Singh and Ngadni (2023), Bae (2009) and Loizou and Avgitidou (2014). These instances highlight a preschool's difficulties in converting children's rights into effective educational practices, in addition to different perspectives on play. To create inclusivity, equitable early childhood settings where children are viewed to be citizens with agency as well as voice in addition to being learners, are imperative if any disconnect is to be addressed.

This dissertation used a literature review to explore the following research question:

What does the early childhood education leadership research reveal about early childhood education leaders engaging with parents in the context of play-based learning?

In this dissertation, as highlighted in chapter two, I utilised systematic search process to look for relevant studies that provided insight into relationships between parents and early childhood education leaders, the importance of communication in fostering understanding of play based education, as well the ongoing issue of parents' preferences over formal academic education over play-based learning approaches. The purpose of this study was to explore leadership methods that promote better school and family relationships in early childhood contexts and to analyse how early childhood education leaders may effectively communicate with parents to support play-based learning. Three key strategies emerged from the findings, relational engagement, curriculum engagement and fostering play-based learning.

6.1 Relationship development as an engagement strategy

In this dissertation, a key conclusion from the analysis is that an effective early childhood centre depends on parents and ECE leaders having respectful relationships. Building relationships based on open communication, trust, and transparency is essential for resolving conflicts and misunderstandings between parents' academic goals and the educational value of play. This was covered in chapter three, the leadership role, communication, as well as parents were discussed.

When early childhood educators give time to meaningful, reciprocating conversation, they provide parents a chance to consider and speak about their presumptions about their children's learning. These thoughtful discussions give parents a greater understanding of how play fosters development of fundamental academic abilities, such as including self-control, literacy, and numeracy. This focus on relational engagement is consistent with Lindsay's (2024) contention that, when addressing the complex nature of providing high-quality services, fostering interpersonal relationships is essential. Connections and trust must be understood as an essential principle in early childhood research and practice.

As discussed in Chapter four, play-based learning in early childhood, the findings show that parents, especially those who were from cultural backgrounds that place a high priority on academic achievement, face a continuing misunderstanding about play-based learning. Huang (2013) points out, for example, Chinese parents frequently view education as an important way of achieving status in society. In such an environment, play is usually viewed as ineffective or unrelated to learning. Therefore, parents may place more importance on academic success, and because of this, they expect structured education rather than child-initiated play in early childhood centres.

6.2 The Curriculum as an Engagement Strategy

Developing successful ECE practices that involve families and children requires high-quality programmes. A well-rounded curriculum incorporates social, emotional, and cognitive development and promotes involvement from parents and other stakeholders

OECD (2019). Studies have demonstrated a direct correlation between curriculum quality and both short-term and long-term developmental outcomes (Ansari & Purtell, 2018; Leseman et al., 2017). In this circumstance, ECE leaders need to take measures to make arrangements to ensure the curriculum not only satisfies developmental standards that is age-appropriate learning and developmental milestones in domains like language, cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development, but also speaks to the cultural values and real-world experiences of the families that it serves (Ansari & Purtell, 2018; Leseman et al., 2017).

6.3 Fostering Play Based Learning and Improving Centre-Family Relationships

In chapter five, parental involvement and leadership challenges in the implementation of play-based learning were analysed. A Woven Mat of partnership, in a metaphorical sense, where leadership is a 'binding thread' was discussed. When parents are viewed as co-weavers of the whāriki, their contributions are valued as fundamental rather than additional. To build a curriculum, which is both comprehensive and flexible, the contributions of their cultural narratives, communal values as well as everyday experiences are interwoven with educators and children (Fenech et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, 2017; Wood & Hedges, 2024). Fostering this interweaving process requires empathy, openness, and willingness to collaborate together to create meaning (Heikkinen et al., 2024).

6.4 Recommendations

Apart from the challenges of managing parental expectations, the findings also highlight how marginalised ECE leaders are when compared to primary and secondary school leaders. The conflicts ECE leaders encounter includes striking a balance between the administrative demands of performance and accountability and the relational ethics in early childhood teaching.

Based on Argyris and Schön's (1974, 1996, cited in Cardno & Reynolds, 2009), theory of action, they contend that leaders need to develop mental models that enable them to face organisational difficulties head-on rather than sidestep them. Leaders may find it difficult to balance these conflicting objectives if professional development is devoid of an underpinning in ethical reasoning as well as systems thinking, which could lead to role conflict, frustration, and stress at work (Cardno & Reynolds, 2009). According to Youngs (2020) the intricacy of educational leadership emphasises the necessity of moral judgement and critical thought. Therefore, the development of leadership in ECE needs to be rethought as a highly ethical, relational, as well as context-specific practice rather than just a collection of managerial skills. ECE leadership development needs to be afforded the same resourcing and profiling as school leadership development.

6.4.1 Global: Broader international context

In the international context, equity-based funding methods that give underprivileged areas priority and offer long-term, culturally-based professional development routes are necessary for this change. For leadership development frameworks to advance educational parity, structural inequities must be addressed. To promote inclusion and equity, leadership development must address these structural gaps, according to research by Ballaschk et al. (2024) in Germany, and Norheim and Moser (2020) in Norway. Similarly, Germany, Chile, Iceland, Japan, Denmark, Norway, Korea, Israel as well as Turkey are mentioned in OECD (2019) reports. Ranta et al. (2023) draws attention to the additional professional and pedagogical challenges faced by early childhood education leaders in Finland. For example:

- Recognise leadership development as an issue of global equity.
- Promote long-term international funding methods that assist training that is culturally appropriate.
- Provide global examples of successful approaches to resolving the conflict between relational ethics and accountability.

6.4.2 National (New Zealand)

ECE leaders are at the centre of inclusive practices because they regularly interact with children and families across migrant, indigenous and socioeconomically disadvantaged homes. In New Zealand, leadership development is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and sensitive to the social and cultural elements that influence the expectations and aspirations of families (Ministry of Education, 2017). Research indicates that leaders frequently struggle to balance their professional aspirations with their parents' expectations, underscoring the necessity of deliberate ways to resolve these conflicts (Cardno & Reynolds, 2009).

The importance of play-based learning may be viewed differently by parents, especially those from cultural backgrounds that place emphasis more on academic achievement. Fostering partnerships with families also requires an understanding of various perspectives, such as those expressed in Pacific indigenous beliefs and values (Matapo, 2021). Therefore, to address this type of issue, early childhood education centres must give educators and leaders specialised training so they can manage challenging parent communication. For example:

- Leaders can hold seminars to explain structured play and video examples to migrant families who consider play is primarily a fun.
- Leaders can collaborate to create culturally sensitive play activities when Indigenous whānau raise issues that the curriculum doesn't represent their language or values.

6.4.3 Centre-Level

6.4.3.1 Challenging Conversations and Relational Perspective

To assist parents in ‘climbing down the ladder of inference’, leaders must cultivate open communication, clarify assumptions, and have reflective conversations that clear up misconceptions regarding play-based learning. Relationships that promote children's learning and wellbeing are strengthened when trust is established and families are made

to feel appreciated. Leaders and the communities they are serving are let down when leadership development paradigms disregard relational competency and culturally specific knowledge.

To empower leaders to combat marginalisation and advance inclusion in their ECE organisations and communities, targeted, well-funded professional development is important. To improve interpersonal abilities and self-assurance in handling challenging situations, particularly in New Zealand, as Cooper (2025) highlights, leadership development needs to be viewed as an equitable issue. Every early childhood educator and leader should be prepared to address a range of needs and equal outcomes, and have training related to managing challenging conversations.

6.4.3.2 Pedagogical Perspective

Centre-based coaching and mentoring must be given top priority. In addition to supporting moral decision-making, structured reflective activities can foster reflective thinking regarding teaching and leadership. Additionally, to successfully promote play-based learning in discussions with parents, leaders must have access to pedagogical resources and tools. Lastly, fostering cooperation and trust with families from various backgrounds requires the development of culturally sensitive engagement strategies.

6.5 Amid the Laughs: My Voice as a Professional in Early Childhood Education

The significance of play-based learning and parent relationships have been highlighted in this dissertation, but it is also important to recognise the unseen burden which early childhood education professionals face. A wide range of responsibilities fall on early childhood leaders, including maintaining high-quality educational settings, satisfying various parental expectations, complying to laws and guidelines, assisting staff, and promoting the welfare as well as overall development of children. However, early childhood education leaders are still underappreciated and often overlooked regardless of their competent work. Early childhood educators may not enjoy the same amount of

respect, recognition, or professional status as those working in primary and secondary schools.

The perception that early childhood educators are only "babysitters" or "nannies" looking after children until they begin formal school is still commonly believed. For example, Zhang and Yu (2016) conducted a qualitative case study with five early childhood educators in mainland China, findings that despite their rejection of this title, educators continued to encounter persistent assumptions that undermined their identity as professionals. Reflecting on the issue, Lightfoot and Frost (2015) explored the way policies and social views impact educator's experiences and feelings of status in the broader education sector in their qualitative study on the professional identities of early childhood educators in England. They discovered that many educators thought their job was underappreciated in comparison to working in primary or secondary schools, based on their interviews with practitioners in early childhood settings. For instance, Sadie, one of the early childhood educator was interviewed, stated that "I have met people who think I get paid less than secondary school teachers because I work with the youngest children in the education system" (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015, p. 410). Another interviewee in Lightfoot and Frost's (2015) study, Lisa, reflects this when she says "Nursery is viewed as just a bit of playing… there's no real education going on. We are just kind, smiling ladies playing with little children. They should see my professional development targets…" (p. 411).

However, this perspective overlooks the courage required to lead with integrity as well as the dedication to provide joyful, meaningful learning experiences which lay the groundwork for children's futures that lie behind those smiles (Little & Karaolis, 2023). Even though early childhood education educators frequently lack the recognition they deserve, there is one aspect of the job that no one can ever take away from them: the priceless joy of working with children. Yet along with that joy come the invisible burdens they bear on a daily basis. Burdens that only they are able to understand. These perspectives demonstrate, how deeply held opinions against early childhood education may still erode professional recognition as well as fuel early childhood educators' sense of marginalisation (Little & Karaolis, 2023).

This perspective needs to change. Early childhood educational leadership requires a balanced, relational strategy that incorporates advocacy, caring, and pedagogical skills rather than being reduced to a single model like educational or distributed leadership. They also challenge conventional leadership theories, which tend to emphasise hierarchical power and overlook the relational responsibility and emotional development that are essential to early childhood practice.

In addition, equally essential is the recognition for teacher leadership, whereby educators across all levels take charge of professional development, family partnerships, and development of curriculum. Educators fight against the social undervaluation of their profession, as documented by Lightfoot and Frost (2015), while Zhang and Yu (2016) demonstrate how educators oppose being limited to "babysitter" responsibilities. The courage and integrity needed for implementing meaningful play-based learning in spite of marginalisation is also emphasised by Little and Karaolis (2023).

Behind the stage, these are the unseen burdens that early childhood educators bear with dedication and care every day, yet they are frequently overlooked. Early childhood education leaders are developing engaging curriculum, forming relationships with families, managing teams of educators, and advocating for children's rights for education through play. Their efforts as early childhood professionals help children thrive in school as well as in the future.

Joy is a fruit of play for both the child and the educator. It is a duty for early childhood professionals to look at their own ladders of inference and consider the presumptions they have about themselves, their Centre’s families, and colleagues. Reflecting on unseen burden of early childhood education professionals carry, they should be treated with the same dignity, have the same professional standing, and be recognised for their contribution in their educational system and society. The importance of early childhood education is properly recognised and valued by cultivating a society of reflection, understanding, as well as shared goals.

“He manako te kōura i kore ai”

Wishing for the crayfish won’t bring it. (Coxhead, 2019)

This work is dedicated to all early childhood education professionals. Action, courage, and dedication are what allow them to realise their goals for children, communities as well as families. They provide spaces where whānau are accepted as partners, in which tamariki can gain knowledge through play, where early education is filled with a sense of belonging and respect.

I pray this whakataukī empowers all to continue learning, to lead strategically, as well as understand that all mahi has a lasting impact. One deliberate step at a time. Kia kaha, kia māia, kia manawanui—be courageous, strong, and unshakeable.

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Appendix Summaries Table Examples

Table 2

ECE Leadership Summaries Table

Note. Colmer et al., (2014): Who are the educational leaders? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 39*(4), 103–113. https://doi-org.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/10.1177/183693911403900414

Data	Themes	Study design	Sample	Findings	AM notes	Country
SAGE Journals	Director as overall educational leader Collaborative professional development and learning The role of distributed leadership.	Quantitative data gathered through surveys and qualitative analysis guided by adaptation theory, the study design is a case study employing a mixed-methods approach.	2 - early childhood directors different centres.	The study's main conclusions demonstrate that directors were essential to the centre's educational leadership and that distributing authority to room leaders was essential to fostering teachers' professional development.	The case study centers may not be typical of early childhood centres in general, but they were chosen for this study due to their participation in professional development activities. Additionally, the study did not evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning and development initiatives or try to link professional learning, leadership, and child outcomes. The significance of leadership styles and the influence of leaders' comprehension of how professional learning takes place were questioned by data analysis; however, the nature of the data obtained precludes a thorough examination of these factors. Additionally, the study's modest scale restricts how broadly the results may be applied. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the study brought up pertinent points regarding the present national policy reforms and the necessity of taking into account the roles that professional development and leadership play in early childhood reform.	Australia

Table 3
ECE Leadership Summaries Table

Note. Heikka, J., Waniganayake, M., & Hujala, E. (2013). Contextualizing distributed leadership within Early Childhood Education: Current understandings, research evidence and future challenges. *Educational Management Administration & Le*), 30-44. *adership*, *41*(1https:// i.org/10.1177/1741143212462700

Data	Key words	Study design	Sample	Findings	AM notes	Country
SAGE Journals	distributed leadership, early childhood education, leadership, literature review	conceptual research design	A variety of stakeholders, including office workers, district administrators, consultants, parents, and children, who may or may not assume leadership roles.	The paper combines studies on school leadership with early childhood education to create a common agenda for distributed leadership. Encourages organisational transformation. Improves learning results. Enhances cohesion among various stakeholders. The need for greater leadership skills in early childhood education is highlighted by national curriculum modifications in Finland and Australia. Make sure that distributed leadership is understood well, and encourage cooperation between researchers in early childhood education and schools. Take into account the structural variety of leadership positions and early childhood environments. With the help of cognitive science, leadership is shared among all parties involved, including families and communities.	By relating distributed leadership theory to early childhood and school education environments, the study seeks to create a new research topic.	Canada, UK, USA, New Zealand, Australia

Table 4

Play-Based Summaries Table

Data	Keywords	Study design	Sample	Findings	AM notes	Country
Google Scholar	Play-based learning Interactive technology	mixed methods design qualitative and quantitative	Canadian primary school 13 child participants 1 kindergarten teacher	While not substantially different from a control group, children who used math applications in a play-based learning environment demonstrated modest increases in math achievement from the pre- to post-test. Numeracy learning chances were not diminished by the use of interactive technology; children were still involved and cooperative, particularly when using imaginative apps. Without supervision, children selected apps that were more enjoyable than instructive. This emphasises how crucial it is to choose apps that are interesting and instructive. Creative apps had a greater effect on children's attention and engagement, while app difficulty also had an impact. Apps that were more imaginative and suitably difficult maintained users' interest longer. These patterns of involvement are consistent with those of Couse and Chen (2010),	The math achievement of children who used math applications in a play-based environment improved slightly from the pre-test to the post-test, but not appreciably more than that of the control group. Children remained engaged and cooperative, and interactive technology did not diminish opportunities for learning numeracy. Without supervision, children favoured entertainment over educational applications, underscoring the significance of choosing interesting and educational resources. Apps that were imaginative and suitably difficult improved focus and maintained engagement. Children who were older and had better math skills demonstrated higher levels of interest, which is consistent with Couse & Chen (2010).To validate results and more thoroughly evaluate the impact of app quality, a lengthier, more extensive investigation is required.	Canada

				who discovered that engagement rises with age and mathematical proficiency. To confirm these results and investigate the influence of app quality in further detail, a lengthier study with a bigger sample size is required.		

Note. Miller, T. (2018). Developing numeracy skills using interactive technology in a play-based learning environment. *IJ STEM Education, 5*, 39. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0135-2

Table 5

Play-Based Summaries Table

Data	Keywords	Study design	Sample	Findings	AM notes	Country
Sage Journal	Digital technologies, family literacy, early literacy, bilingual children, young children, home literacy environment	Qualitative case study Participant observation Field notes Photographs Video recordings Parent interviews	2 families with children aged 1 and 2 years old	The findings highlight the fact that iDevices are more than just distraction devices. Rather, they are a component of intricate, emergent reading practices in the lives of children, providing them with new, multimodal, socially mediated methods to interact with language, stories and symbols.	The study's conclusions can help parents and teachers understand what, why, and how children use digital devices for learning.	Canada

Note. Harrison, E., & McTavish, M. (2018). "i"Babies: Infants' and toddlers' emergent language and literacy in a digital culture of iDevices. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 18*(2), 163–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798416653175