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Walden University
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Abstract

Early Childhood Pre-Service Teacher Interns' Experiences in Building Relationships

With Students' Families

by

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MA, Walden University, 2017

BS, Ryerson University, 2009

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Early Childhood Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Strong relationships between educators and students' families are essential for fostering learning environments to meet the needs of early childhood students. The problem that was addressed through this study is that many early childhood preservice teacher interns (ECPTIs) experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of teacher preparation in Alberta. Framed by ecological systems and self-determination theories, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore ECPTIs' experiences building relationships with students' families and to understand the resources needed to strengthen those relationships in Alberta. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 ECPTIs enrolled in a teacher preparation program working in an accredited early childhood program with supervision and mentoring. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis using open coding. Three themes emerged from the data: (1) ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication with families; (2) ECPTIs adopted an advocacy role during their internship; and (3) ECPTIs desired to improve community engagement. Recommendations for further research include gaining input from ECPTIs mentors and students' families. Its significance lies in strengthening the alignment between teacher education practices and the relational competencies essential in early childhood settings, thereby supporting more responsive, equitable and family-centered learning experiences to promote positive developmental outcomes for children, including emotional security, meaningful participation and lifelong learning skills.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband, my children, and family, whose unwavering love, support, and encouragement carried me through every challenge of this journey. To my committee and mentors who believed in me, thank you for inspiring me to keep learning and growing. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study focused on the relationships between early childhood preservice teacher interns (ECPTIs) and the students' families that they interact with during their internship placements just prior to becoming fully certified in the early childhood education (ECE) field in a province located in Alberta. This study is important because strong relationships between teachers, students, and families in ECE are essential for fostering a nurturing learning environment that supports children's development and wellbeing (Antony-Newman, 2024; Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023; Rojas et al., 2023). Positive relationships between teachers, students, and families are critical in ECE, and understanding how ECPTIs build these relationships is essential for improving ECE teacher preparation programs (Antony-Newman, 2024). Teacher-student-family relationships directly affect children's emotional security, learning outcomes, and social development, making it crucial to explore how ECPTIs acquire the skills to foster such connections (Choquette et al., 2024). While there is extensive research on the relationships between experienced teachers, students, and families, there are few studies exploring how ECPTIs, who are still learning and shaping their professional identities, establish these crucial relationships. ECPTIs are in a unique position because they are simultaneously learning to manage classroom responsibilities while engaging with students' families in real-life contexts. This study has the potential to fill a gap in practice by identifying the challenges and successes that ECPTIs experience in building relationships

with students' families to provide insights into how teacher education programs can better prepare ECPTIs for the complexities of teaching in ECE. Knowing and understanding the resources and support systems that ECPTIs need to be successful can potentially be used to improve teacher education, ECE curriculum design, and internship programs.

Chapter 1 introduces the research by providing a comprehensive overview of the study's key components, including a summary of the literature, the research problems, the purpose, and the research questions. This chapter outlines the conceptual foundation of the study, which draws from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These theories guided the exploration of ECPTIs' perspectives on their experiences building relationships with students' families in early childhood education programs across Alberta. By integrating the framework, I identified the resources ECPTIs believe are necessary to improve their practice in student and family relationship building. In addition, the chapter provides key definitions, assumptions, and clarifies the scope, delimitations, and limitations of this study. Chapter 1 concludes with a summary that sets the stage for Chapter 2, where the literature review further explores relevant research in this field.

Background

Teacher-student-family relationships are an integral part of ECE programs (Barron et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2023). Family involvement in a child's learning positively influences academic and developmental outcomes, underscoring the importance of this area of study (Anthony-Newman, 2024; Choquette et al., 2024).

Researchers have revealed that positive teacher-child relationships are crucial for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Miller & Herman, 2021). Early interactions between teachers, students, and their families have long-term effects on students' academic success and behavioral outcomes (Premo et al., 2023).

The research literature on ECPTIs' relationships with students' families has highlighted the importance of strong relational dynamics in ECE, emphasizing the role these relationships play in children's development and learning outcomes (Choquette et al., 2024). Strengthening student-family relationships during the ECE teacher internship phase helps to build future educators' capacities to engage families in meaningful ways (Antony-Newman, 2024). Internships for pre-service ECE teachers provide an opportunity for them to practice building nurturing, supportive relationships with young students, which are the foundation for effective teaching in ECE settings (Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023; Premo et al., 2023). Researchers have further suggested that pre-service teachers need to develop skills to communicate and collaborate with families effectively (Choquette et al., 2024). However, many ECPTIs perceive themselves as inadequately equipped to interact with families, suggesting a gap in the literature that emphasizes the necessity for greater support from teacher preparation programs (Choquette et al., 2024). There was a need to examine this gap in practice by exploring ECPTIs' perceived challenges in their relationships with students and parents during their ECE internships. My study

was necessary because the outcomes of this study might be used to support research-based approaches in creating professional development practices.

Problem Statement

The problem that was addressed through this study is that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta. At the local level, college/university faculty in teacher education programs throughout the province meet monthly to discuss their programs. In a meeting of faculty, who have pre-service teachers practice teaching in ECE classrooms as part of their teacher preparation program coursework, the issue that preservice teachers face challenges in building relationships with students' families, has been an ongoing topic of discussion among faculty. The challenges and successes experienced by ECPTIs in establishing meaningful and successful relationships with students' families are not well-documented, and studies are needed to provide documentation (Ash et al., 2024). A decision was made by faculty members, who supervise ECPTIs, to conduct surveys of current ECPTIs in their respective ECE teacher preparation programs as evidence of the challenges ECPTIs report having in building relationships with students' families. When completing the survey related to positive relationships, half of preservice teachers said they experienced challenges in building relationships and wanted to learn more about building positive relationships (ECE Faculty, personal communication, May 2023).

The problem that many ECPTIs experience in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation exists more

broadly in the literature (Choquette et al., 2024; Özcan et al., 2023). Researchers have identified challenges that ECPTIs have when developing relationships with students' families (Özcan et al., 2023; Sanders-Smith et al., 2019) in Canada (Antony-Newman, 2024; Choquette et al., 2024) and have suggested that more research is needed. Among the challenges reported in the literature are struggles navigating diverse family structures, understanding cultural differences in cultures, and managing professional boundaries, all while maintaining their roles as interns (Choquette et al., 2024; Özcan et al., 2023). ECPTIs have reported needing more support and resources to overcome their challenges and barriers to building relationships, particularly in diverse and complex early childhood environments (Özcan et al., 2023). ECPTIs frequently have difficulties in this domain because of their limited hands-on experience, inadequate instruction in communication and relationship-building strategies, and the varied and diverse requirements of the students' families they interact with during their internships (Lewis et al., 2023). The challenge of establishing robust relationships can have substantial consequences for what is expected of early education and the holistic growth of children (Choquette et al., 2024). This study contributes to filling the gap in the literature on practice that is needed for the success of ECPTIs. The research problem is framed within the early childhood discipline to explore ECPTIs' abilities to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. Findings from my study can potentially increase the ECPTI's knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for them to build relationships with student's families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building effective relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build effective relationships with students' families in the western province of Canada. In this basic qualitative study, I explored ECPTIs' experiences with challenges, barriers, successes, or achievements in building effective relationships with students' families, and the resources that ECPTIs report are needed to build effective relationships with students' families in the western province of Canada. I did use an interpretative technique or data-driven interpretation since it is commonly used in qualitative studies (Pervin et al., 2022). Interpretive qualitative research is based on the notion that social reality emerges from people's experiences (Pervin et al., 2022). This was revealed as ECPTIs participated in a semi structured, open-ended interview protocol.

My study aligns with the constructivist paradigm (also known as interpretivism) since it investigates relationships, which are essentially subjective and socially created. A constructivist approach would focus on studying how ECPTIs perceive and interpret their relationships with children's families. ECPTIs' relationships with students' families are highly contextual and driven by cultural, social, and personal aspects. A basic qualitative study will include interviews and maintaining a reflective journal; these approaches are consistent with the constructivist paradigm in that they strive to capture participants' viewpoints and lived experiences.

The study focused on ECPTIs and their experiences building relationships with children's families. I did record interviews with the ECPTIs about their lived experiences

and perspectives. Interviews were conducted to gain insight into the specific challenges, successes, barriers, and achievements that individuals face when establishing relationships with children's families by emphasizing their own lived experiences. Researchers have indicated that ECPTIs have a sense of inadequacy in their abilities to engage with students' families during and following the completion of their initial teacher education (ITE) programs (Antony-Newman, 2024). ECPTIs and teacher educators have mentioned that parent engagement is important and underlined the urgent necessity to prepare teacher candidates to work with parents and families (Antony-Newman, 2024). The effectiveness of early childhood education relies heavily on the establishment of effective relationships among teachers, students, and families (Ash et al., 2024). In this study, I explored the experiences of ECPTIs in building effective relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build effective relationships with students' families in the western province. The study focused on how ECPTIs purposefully develop relationships and engage with children and their families to build effective relationships. The strategies used by ECPTIs influence their abilities to build relationships with children's families, their professional development, and the quality of early childhood education (Winship et al., 2021).

Research Questions

Two research questions (RQ) were selected to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families, and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. These questions were appropriate to guide this basic qualitative study to address the problem that many ECPTIs experience

challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta

RQ 1: What are ECPTIs' experiences (challenges, and successes) in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta

RQ 2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The concept being explored in this qualitative study is that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation. Theories that supported this study combine the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Ecological systems theory and self-determination theory provide a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of ECPTIs' relationships with students' families in ECE.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted the various levels of influence on human development, spanning from the microsystem (immediate surroundings) to the macrosystem (cultural environment) in the ecological theory. This part of the combined conceptual framework was utilized to examine how different systems, both within and outside the classroom, influence the relationships among ECPTIs, students, and families. Using ecological systems theory, one may analyze how many factors, such as personal traits, classroom interactions, institutional regulations, and social standards, influence

these connections (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner mentioned that recognition of the parent-teacher relationship provides a key to understanding developmental changes in children and the adults who serve as primary caregivers, such as mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, and others in caregiving and educational roles.

The microsystem comprises of direct relationships and interactions, such as teacher-child interactions, parent-teacher communication, and peer dynamics. The mesosystem, or the connections between microsystems, may be demonstrated in how family-teacher collaborations impact influence a child's learning experience and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Good communication between parents and ECPTIs can promote mutual understanding, shared goals, and consistency in supporting the child's development. The exosystem contains rules, regulations, and administrative choices that have an indirect impact on classroom practices and relationship-building initiatives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, the macrosystem represents the cultural values, cultural norms, and societal expectations that influence how teachers and families engage in early childhood education. Using ecological systems theory, this study looked at how many variables, such as interns' characteristics, classroom interactions, institutional regulations, and social norms, interact to promote relationship-building (Antony-Newman, 2024). ECPTIs' own beliefs and cultural competency may influence their capacity to form relationships with families from other backgrounds. Similarly, institutional training programs and classroom procedures have the potential to either empower or limit interns' ability to develop meaningful relationships. At the macrosystem level, societal norms about family engagement and

teacher duties influence expectations for collaboration and trust between ECPTIs and families.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) underlined the necessity of acknowledging the parent-teacher relationships as a key to understanding children's developmental changes. Strong, collaborative relationships between parents and teachers may form a supporting network that promotes not just the child's development but also the growth of people in caregiving and educational roles, such as parents, grandparents, and pre-service teachers. This demonstrates the reciprocal power of relationships, in which teachers learn and grow from their encounters with students' families, benefiting both their professional and personal growth (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Ecological systems theory is applied to this study to provide a comprehensive framework for examining the relationship dynamics among ECPTIs, students, and families, emphasizing how these relationships are shaped by multiple, interrelated environmental systems (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This approach emphasizes the importance of training programs that educate ECPTIs to navigate and adapt effectively to the many situations in which they work.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is based on a motivational theory that proposes a teacher's attunement to the needs of a child for relatedness, competence, and autonomy gives the child a sense of emotional security (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Based on attachment theory, relatedness highlights the necessity of instructors creating chances for student participation by gaining an understanding of the child and dedicating time and resources

to meet their needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The concept of relatedness suggests that teachers can support students' involvement by understanding their needs and allocating appropriate time and resources to foster their development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students' competence is supported when teachers provide comprehensible instructions, guidance, and feedback. When teachers provide resources to support the student in developing autonomy and give students meaningful choices that are relevant in their lives, they show respect for the student (Split et al., 2022).

Additionally, SDT emphasizes the significance of balancing these three psychological demands in ways that are tailored to the developmental and individual characteristics of children (Split et al., 2022). Teachers who are sensitive to these demands not only motivate students but also contribute to their whole development academically, socially, and emotionally. Teachers provide the groundwork for students' immediate and long-term success in learning and personal development by building stable relationships, providing organized environments, and recognizing their growing autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Split et al., 2022). According to the NAEYC (2022), early childhood education significantly impacts cognitive development, leading to academic success, improved problem-solving, critical thinking, and language and communication skills, crucial for life success. SDT's principles emphasize its significance as a framework for guiding effective teacher-student interactions and creating supportive learning environments.

SDT provides an effective framework for supporting ECPTIs in developing the trust and rapport required for strong, long-term relationships with both students and their

families. By connecting their strategies with SDT concepts, interns may guarantee that their practices are developmentally appropriate and sensitive to their students' different needs.

Combined Theories

Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for exploring the complex dynamics that support relationships in ECE programs, giving ECPTIs the skills they need to establish more productive, empathetic, and inspiring relationships with students and their parents (see Özcan et al., 2023). These theories offer a thorough structured approach to comprehending human development by examining the interplay of many environmental systems and the fundamental desire to have a sense of connection and belonging with others (Crawford, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2000). A more detailed description of the conceptual framework will be provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The problem that was addressed through this study is that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. Qualitative methodology was most appropriate to explore the purpose and address the problem because it contributes to understanding people's beliefs, experiences, behaviors, attitudes, and interactions will be examined within the qualitative research methodology (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My purpose involved exploring the

interrelationships among the microsystem (classroom environment), mesosystem (interactions between classroom and family surroundings), exosystem (institutional policies), and macrosystem (cultural backdrop) and teachers' attunement to the needs of a child for relatedness, competence, and autonomy gives the child a sense of emotional security (Deci & Ryan, 2000) in influencing ECPTIs' experiences of challenges, barriers, and accomplishments, as well as to learn what resources are needed to build relationships with students and their families.

The problem that was addressed through this study was that many ECPTIs reported struggling to build relationships with students' families. Ecological systems theory and the self-determination theory propose that interactions are shaped by several causes across diverse systems, and the teachers' attunement to the needs of a child for relatedness, competence, and autonomy gives the child a sense of emotional security (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These conceptual frameworks supported my exploration of ECPTIs' perceptions of their challenges, successes, and resources needed to build relationships with students and their families in Canadian preschools (CP) by guiding my choice of questions related to the different systems (home, school, community).

Interviews are a common form of data collection in qualitative studies (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). I used a basic qualitative study with one-on-one interviews that allowed me to acquire a thorough picture of the phenomenon being investigated concerning ECPTIs' relationships with students' families and understand the substance of their experiences, including their problems, accomplishments, and perceptions of what is required to establish good relationships. I conducted interviews with 12 ECPTIs to collect

interview data. I analyzed the data through coding to identify codes, patterns, categories, and themes (Saldaña, 2021).

Wilhelmy and Kohler (2022) stated that exploring research topics and phenomena is best done through a qualitative study. My study was best suited to use a qualitative design for data collected from one-on-one interviews concerning ECPTIs' relationships with student's families. Participants fulfilled the following requirements to be in line with my study questions, ECPTIs were enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE) and were in close contact with the children and their families throughout the placement. ECPTIs might have been employed but still interns, they had an onsite mentor, they were supervised by college faculty and the preschool program should be accredited. I collected the data from the interviews by asking semi-structured, open-ended interview questions over Zoom that are audio recorded without video. I recorded, analyzed, and transcribed the data without computer programs to reveal codes, patterns, categories, and themes (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Definitions

The following definitions helped to clarify the terms used in this study.

Early childhood education (ECE): Early childhood education is the educational phase that focuses on the development and learning of young children from birth through the age of eight, emphasizing foundational skills and holistic growth (Haslip & Donaldson, 2020).

Preschool program: A preschool program is a center-based program providing care and learning experiences for children between two to five years of age. In this study,

programs include center-based programs (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2023).

Professional development: Professional development is the in-service training activities and opportunities provided to educators during their tenure to enhance their knowledge, skills, and practices related to social-emotional learning (SEL) and teaching (Dyson et al., 2021).

Second language (L2): Second language refers to the second language a child learns after beginning to understand their home language (Norquist, 2024).

Social and emotional learning (SEL): Social and emotional learning encompasses the cognitive and behavioral processes by which individuals, both young and old, acquire and proficiently utilize the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to understand and regulate emotions, establish and accomplish constructive goals, demonstrate empathy towards others, foster and sustain healthy relationships, and make informed decisions (Özcan et al., 2023).

Assumptions

An assumption has been characterized in the literature as a fundamental condition enabling researchers to identify any bias that may compromise the validity of the data (Burkholder, 2020). In research, assumptions are things the researcher believes to be true, but they cannot be proven (Alele & Aduli, 2023). The first assumption I had was that ECPTIs have a basic knowledge of communication and interpersonal skills essential for relationships with children's families. The My second assumption was that ECPTIs can strengthen their teaching and interpersonal abilities, hence, their relationships with

children's families are expected to improve over time. It is believed that these relationships can be improved by experience and training (Burkholder, 2020). In this study, participants were expected to be truthful in sharing their experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations help narrow a study in terms of its location and participants (Burkholder et al., 2020). This study explored ECPTIs' experiences during their internship assignments when they assume classroom responsibilities in various settings, to explore their relationships with student's families. I chose not to include teachers who have over a year after graduation from post-secondary school.

Transferability indicates that the research findings apply to similar contexts, groups, and circumstances in other studies. This study had limited potential for transfer to other settings because I did maintain accurate data collection with detailed descriptions that will allow other researchers to understand the subject and results (Creswell, 2024). I will make my results relevant to others and thoroughly discuss the study's subjects, methodology, and assumptions (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Limitations

Limitations identify weaknesses in a study and provide solutions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Limitations are sometimes beyond the researcher's control. Some limitations of this qualitative study include possible biases, which can be reduced by asking neutral questions and relying on source data (Hueker & Popovic, 2023). One drawback was that replies from interns may add subjective bias. Participants may provide responses they think are appropriate rather than expressing their genuine thoughts or feelings (see

Hueker & Popovic, 2023). Additionally, my interpretation of their responses may be influenced by my perspectives. Another limitation was that different interns may have varying levels of exposure and opportunities to interact with families and children, which can impact the consistency of findings. Participants may exhibit response bias by providing answers that they believe are more socially acceptable rather than accurately representing their genuine thoughts and experiences.

It was important to ensure that my personal beliefs did not affect the interview questions I asked or influenced the methodology of my study (see Hueker & Popovic, 2023). Participants may exhibit response bias by providing answers that they believe are more socially acceptable and what I want to hear rather than accurately representing their genuine thoughts and experiences (Hueker & Popovic, 2023). To reduce implicit bias, I maintained a journal for my reflection and be continually conscious of my preconceived notions, personal biases, and assumptions. To eliminate personal bias, I refrained from expressing my personal ideas and assumptions and instead back up my findings with proof (Hojeij et al., 2021). Some ways to address research bias were through audio taping the interviews, which is common in qualitative research (Tracy, 2019). I did use the exact words of the participants when I transcribed the interviews. Addressing language barriers or cultural triggers that may occur throughout the process of gathering and analyzing data. For some of the ECPTIs, English is their second language, and it was important to ensure their understanding of the interview questions. I had a copy of the questions and made sure the questions are comprehensible for non-English language speakers. I conferred with someone in the ESL program for guidance on academic language

proficiency. I also allowed extra time as needed for cognitive processing, and I answered their questions to clarify meaning. If participants needed an interpreter, they were asked to sign a waiver to ensure confidentiality.

Member checking helps decrease bias, improve credibility, and allow participants to review their responses (Erdman et al., 2023). Avoiding subjective language, making judgments about values, and being explicit will all assist in reducing prejudice. To reduce confirmation bias, I was continually conscious of my own preconceived notions, personal prejudices, assumptions, and hypotheses. To overcome the limitation of my study's sample size, I planned to conduct interviews and analyze the data till saturation. To eliminate the restriction of possible bias, I asked impartial questions and use primary data (Ross et al., 2019).

Significance

The experiences of ECPTIs in establishing effective relationships with children's families are unknown. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building effective relationships with students' families and the resources ECPTIs need to build effective relationships with students' families in the western province of Canada. Early childhood educators have a crucial responsibility in promoting students' intellectual growth and ensuring their overall wellbeing. This includes working closely with families and establishing effective relationships with families (Lewis et al., 2023; Puig & Evenson, 2023). This may be difficult for ECPTIs, mostly because of variables including varying expectations, communication obstacles, cultural disparities, and various degrees of parental engagement (Carla Barron et al.,

2020). These factors are unknown and need to be explored. This study examined the challenges experienced by ECPTIs and identify the specific areas where they may require additional support, guidance, or training. Having this information at the local level may help improve their capacity to effectively involve families and establish relationships that promote children's learning and development.

Özcan et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of implementing successful strategies to build relationships in early childhood education settings, particularly during ECPTIs' practicum experiences. The research may potentially help to improve family engagement and partnership in early childhood programs. Understanding ECPTIs' experiences allows educators to build more successful techniques for incorporating families into their students' learning and development. Findings from this study may inform teacher preparation programs in assisting ECPTIs in developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to foster positive relationships in early childhood settings. Research is important for improving the quality of early childhood education, promoting child development and wellbeing, increasing parental involvement and collaboration, supporting teacher preparation, and promoting equality and inclusion (Özcan et al., 2023).

This study may contribute to closing a gap in the literature on practice by exploring how ECPTIs develop effective relationships with students' families. Building effective relationships is of utmost importance to provide a nurturing learning environment to promote students' social and emotional growth (Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). Further, researchers have suggested that further research on

maintaining ongoing communication between the school and home is needed (Özcan et al., 2023; Sanders-Smith et al., 2019).

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study's focus on ECPTIs' relationships with students' families. A brief review of the literature highlighted the significance of positive relationships in early childhood settings and the need for enhanced support and preparation for ECPTIs to foster such connections. The chapter also discussed the study's potential to contribute to positive social change by addressing the gap in understanding the specific challenges and successes ECPTIs have in building relationships with children and their families, and the findings of my study will also impact positive social change on instructional approaches utilized to help ECPTIs. In this chapter, I outlined the study's introduction, background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. I also presented key components such as definitions, assumptions, scope, and delimitations, followed by a discussion of the limitations and significance of the research. This chapter concludes with a summary, setting the stage for the following sections. Chapter 2 follows with an extensive literature review, the literacy search strategies, the conceptual framework, key variables, concepts, and concludes with a summary and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Many ECPTIs in Alberta face challenges in building relationships with students' families during their internships. This study explored ECPTIs' experiences in developing these relationships and identifies the resources needed to support them. By uncovering underlying issues, the study aimed to inform instructional strategies that better prepare ECPTIs for their roles in early childhood education, ultimately enhancing their ability to foster positive and collaborative relationships within the educational community. Existing research underscores the significance of strong ECPTI-student-family relationships, linking them to improved trust, communication, and student engagement (Antony-Newman, 2024; Choquette et al., 2024). However, barriers such as limited practical training, cultural and familial differences, and insufficient mentorship often hinder relationship-building efforts. Given the connection between teacher-family relationships and positive developmental outcomes for students, further exploration is necessary to understand how ECPTIs navigate these challenges during their internships. This chapter outlines the literature search strategies, presents the conceptual framework guiding the study, and provides a comprehensive review of research on ECPTIs' relationships with students' families. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and their implications. This chapter presents an extensive literature review, including the search strategies, conceptual framework, key variables, and concepts, and concludes with a summary and conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

Multiple databases were utilized to conduct a comprehensive search for up-to-date articles about the subjects discussed in the literature review. The databases and resources comprised Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCOhost, SAGE Journal, Multidisciplinary Databases, and the Walden University Library. The articles were written in English, peer-reviewed, and published from 2020 to 2024. For the search, initial concepts included *communication challenges, parents' expectations, classroom management, parental engagement, professional relationships, parental involvement, relationship-building, family-school interactions, parental support, early education, community partnerships, collaboration, teacher-child relationship, socio-emotional development, classroom management, cultural competency, family-school interactions, attachment theory, inclusive education, community engagement, student success, teacher preparation, child development, supportive relationships, and pre-service teacher.*

Conceptual Framework

This study integrated ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding ECPTIs' relationship-building experiences. Ecological systems theory examines the multiple environmental influences shaping an individual, while self-determination theory focuses on the internal psychological needs, such as relatedness, competence, and autonomy, that drive motivation and development. These theories highlight how external factors, and internal drives interact to shape ECPTIs' abilities to connect with students' families. This study explored ECPTIs' perceptions of their

challenges, successes, and resource needs in fostering relationships within preschool environments by applying these frameworks.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. These theories also inform the study's focus on interactions across key systems, including home, school, and community, offering insight into how ECPTIs navigate and strengthen these relationships. The integration of ecological systems theory and self-determination theory provides a comprehensive approach to understanding ECPTIs' experiences and the interconnected systems' role of home, school, and community in shaping teacher-student-family interactions.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) emphasized the interconnected layers of environmental influences ranging from the microsystem (immediate surroundings) to the macrosystem (cultural and societal factors) that shape a child's development. Relationships between family, school, and community impact learning both directly and indirectly, positioning ECPTIs as integral figures within a child's broader ecological environment. Strong relationships with students' families are crucial for positive developmental outcomes.

This framework was used to analyze how various factors, such as personal traits, classroom interactions, institutional policies, and societal norms, shape

ECPTIs' ability to build relationships. The microsystem, which includes direct interactions with parents, peers, and teachers, plays a key role in fostering supportive relationships that enhance a child's growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Guy-Evans, 2020). The mesosystem further illustrates how these microsystems interact, influencing a child's overall development. Crawford (2020) applied Bronfenbrenner's theory to examine human development across multiple environments, demonstrating its relevance in fields like child welfare and juvenile justice. Through case studies, the research highlighted how ecological systems theory provides a structured approach to understanding complex social and educational interactions, reinforcing its value in studying ECPTIs' relationship-building experiences.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) supports how fulfilling students' psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy fosters emotional security and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness is rooted in attachment theory, where teachers support students by offering engagement and dedicated resources. Competence develops when educators provide clear instructions, guidance, and feedback. Autonomy emerges when students are respected and given meaningful choices that connect to their lives (Split et al., 2022). SDT identified three core motivational drivers:

Autonomy – The need for control over one's actions and decisions.

Competence – The desire to feel effective and capable.

Relatedness – The fundamental need for connection and belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Guay (2022) emphasized that these needs are interdependent and must be examined together, highlighting the relationship between autonomous motivation (intrinsic and recognized extrinsic motivation) and academic success. This underscores SDT's relevance as a framework for educational interventions that enhance motivation and learning outcomes. Intrinsic motivation in performing tasks for personal satisfaction leads to higher-quality outcomes compared to external motivators (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In this study, I explored how SDT principles interact with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, examining the role of the microsystem (classroom), mesosystem (teacher-family interactions), exosystem (institutional policies), and macrosystem (cultural influences) in shaping ECPTIs' experiences. By understanding how teachers' attunement to students' psychological needs influences relationship-building, this research identified challenges, successes, and resources needed for fostering meaningful connections with students' families. By following a basic qualitative methodology, I explored ECPTIs' experiences in building effective positive relationships with students and their parents, and how ECPTIs' responsiveness to students' psychological needs affects relationship-building, including the challenges that are encountered, the accomplishments attained, and the resources required to cultivate meaningful and supportive relationships with students' families.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

The experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (2000), this research examines how external environmental influences and internal psychological needs shape these relationships. ECPTIs' evolving professional identities, students' developmental needs, and diverse cultural and social family contexts create complex and multifaceted relationship dynamics. These relationships are essential for fostering trust, communication, and collaboration, key components of inclusive and supportive learning environments (Choquette et al., 2024).

Strong teacher-student and teacher-family relationships positively impact educational outcomes, enhancing academic achievement, social-emotional development, and student engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Split et al., 2022). A secure relationship with a teacher fosters belonging, motivation, and confidence, while strong teacher-family connections promote continuous communication, reciprocal trust, and shared developmental goals (Antony-Newman, 2024; Choquette et al., 2024). These relationships influence not only individual learning but also broader developmental trajectories, emphasizing the need to prepare ECPTIs for meaningful and culturally responsive interactions with students' families. However, ECPTIs encounter significant barriers, including time constraints, cultural misunderstandings, and inadequate training (Antony-Newman, 2024). Working with students' families from diverse linguistic,

cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds presents challenges in communication and expectations, sometimes leading to misunderstandings or discomfort (Choquette et al., 2024; Fumero et al., 2024). A lack of cultural awareness or sensitivity can result in unintentional biases that hinder relationship-building efforts. By integrating these theoretical perspectives and research, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that influence ECPTIs' relationships. This insight not only informs the current study but also lays the groundwork for strategies to support ECPTIs in forming effective, culturally responsive partnerships with students' families. The concepts that were explored in this qualitative study, which are related to the literature, included that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation. There are potential successes when ECPTIs are responsive to students' psychological needs because their actions affect how they cultivate meaningful and supportive relationships with students' families.

The Importance of Relationship-Building in Early Childhood Education

Developing strong relationships between teachers, students, and families is essential in early childhood education, as it enhances student engagement, wellbeing, and learning outcomes (Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). Research highlights that ECPTIs who develop social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are better prepared and more effective as educators (Choquette et al., 2024). Strengthening their ability to build collaborative relationships improves

educational achievements and fosters inclusive and supportive environments that recognize and value families, promoting open and honest communication (Barron et al., 2020).

Professional development programs play a critical role in enhancing ECPTIs' relationship-building skills by providing training focused on interpersonal competencies (Barron et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2023). Studies indicated that teachers who receive specialized relationship-based training are more successful in forming meaningful partnerships with families and colleagues, leading to greater student engagement and participation in early education (Barron et al., 2020). Early interventions in teacher education can have lasting impacts on educators' ability to foster positive student and family relationships (Choquette et al., 2024). Establishing and maintaining strong relationships with students, families, and colleagues is essential for ECPTIs in creating effective teaching and learning environments (Lewis et al., 2023). These relationship-building skills enhance classroom inclusiveness, supporting students' social-emotional growth, academic achievement, and overall wellbeing. A teacher's effectiveness is closely tied to their ability to nurture positive relationships, which fosters a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere.

The Role of Strong Relationships in Learning

The ability to build strong relationships with students' families is a critical factor in fostering positive educational outcomes. When ECPTIs establish nurturing and supportive relationships, students feel secure, engaged, and motivated to learn, leading to enhanced academic achievement and social-emotional development (Lewis et al., 2023).

Strong relationships between teachers and students foster a sense of belonging in the classroom, which is important for young students as they cultivate fundamental academic abilities. In addition, positive relationships with families promote the collaboration of home and school, promoting a partnership that enhances children's educational experiences beyond the classroom (Lewis et al., 2023). Relationship-building enables educators to understand students' individual needs, interests, and challenges, allowing them to individually tailor education and offer significant support. By providing ECPTIs with the competencies to cultivate and sustain these relationships, teacher education programs can significantly influence the future achievement of students.

The Importance of Family-Teacher Relationships

Positive family-teacher relationships strengthen parental engagement, which is linked to better school attendance, higher academic performance, and improved student behavior (Lewis et al., 2023). When parents feel supported and connected to their child's teacher, they are more likely to participate in school activities, support learning at home, and collaborate in addressing challenges their child may face. Collaborations between parents and teachers foster shared responsibility for a student's growth, fostering open communication and trust. These partnerships enable educators to get important insights into a student's past, cultural influences, and specific needs, allowing for more individualized effective teaching practices. In addition, when ECPTIs develop skills in connecting with their families early in their careers, they are stronger at managing different family

dynamics and fostering inclusive, supportive classroom settings. Enhancing these relationships eventually benefits not just individual students but also the wider school community by fostering a culture of collaboration and collective educational objectives.

Developing Relationship-Building Skills in ECPTIs

To build inclusive educational settings, ECPTIs must develop relationship-building skills that enable them to support students, families, and the broader school community (Split et al., 2022). Investing in reflective practice, hands-on experience, and family engagement activities ensures that ECPTIs are well-prepared to positively impact student learning (Lewis et al., 2023; Özcan et al., 2023). The acquisition of these abilities requires intentional training in communication, empathy, and cultural responsiveness engage with various families. Mentorship and supervised field experiences are essential, enabling ECPTIs to see and implement ways for cultivating trust and collaboration. Furthermore, coursework consisting of SEL, conflict resolution, and family partnership techniques might assist ECPTIs in overcoming obstacles related to relationship-building. Providing these vital abilities to future educators, teacher preparation programs may enhance the overall quality of early childhood education, ensuring that young students get a loving and supportive learning environment. Alberta's early learning and care framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014) emphasized that the practice of relationships highlights the complex and evolving relationships with many community members and starts when you engage in learning with students' families. By fostering relationships, you establish dynamic environments within early childhood communities,

benefiting both students as mighty learners and citizens and their families. The relationships that exist among educators, students, and families are essential, and relationships established with other community members also improve and strengthen the experiences of families and students within the early childhood community (Lewis et al., 2023; Split et al., 2022).

Teacher-Student Bonds and Student Success

Research consistently shows that secure teacher-student relationships contribute to higher student engagement, improved classroom behavior, and better academic outcomes. A strong teacher-student bond provides a safe, supportive environment where students feel valued and encouraged to succeed (Norheim & Moser, 2020). Understanding how ECPTIs develop these relationships is key to enhancing early childhood education overall. Understanding how ECPTIs develop these relationships not only improves early childhood education but also guides teacher training programs, ensuring that future educators have the appropriate skills to establish significant relationships with their students and families.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competency is a critical skill for educators, particularly in diverse educational settings. Research indicates that culturally responsive teaching techniques promote stronger relationships with students' families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (PolicyWise for Children & Families [Spark guide], 2024). Culture influences all human relationships. Common aspects of culture include cuisine, festivities, and clothing. However, several ways of cultural expression may be invisible

or less visible. In children, culture manifests in their play, social interactions, dietary practices, and sleep patterns. Parents' expectations and ideas regarding a child's behavior, health, and development are frequently influenced by cultural factors (Policy Wise for Children & Families [Spark guide], 2024). A culturally responsive program is beyond just acknowledgment; it involves implementation. It is the continuous process of addressing the cultural needs of children and families with respect and efficacy.

Educators build relationships with community members to enrich and expand children's learning experiences. They also pursue relationships with the wider early childhood community for professional development. This network of relationships supports the complex, growing, and diverse role of an educator. Educators' role within this network is described as a relationship-based approach that fosters healthy early childhood communities, connecting various individuals for the enhancement of students' care, play, learning, and development (Choquette et al., 2024; Makovichuk et al., 2014). Culturally responsive environments commit to building strong and authentic relationships with families. They are the expectations in their own cultures and the unique meanings that culture holds for them and their children. Family-centered relations in practice include understanding children's behaviors and actions by learning about the rituals, values, languages, and practices from families' home cultures, and fostering an inclusive environment where every child feels supported, valued, and understood (Policy Wise for Children & Families [Spark guide], 2024)

Inclusive Practice

By understanding and respecting family traditions, beliefs, and communication styles, ECPTIs create inclusive and supportive environments where students feel valued and secure, which is vital for their learning and development (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Strong relationships extend beyond the classroom by actively involving families and caregivers in the child's educational journey. Trust and open communication between teachers and families lead to shared educational goals, reinforcing student learning at home and school (Choquette et al., 2024; Spark guide, 2024). Interpersonal theory further supports the idea that reciprocity in teacher-child relationships fosters positive emotions and emotional stability, which are key to student development (Horowitz & Strack, 2011; Split et al., 2022). By prioritizing relationship-building, cultural responsiveness, and professional development, ECPTIs can create inclusive and engaging learning environments that are beneficial to students, families, and the entire educational community by fostering positive relationships, implementing culturally sensitive practices, and encouraging collaboration that supports each student's holistic development (Choquette et al., 2024).

Family Engagement and Interpersonal Theory

Building strong relationships extends beyond the classroom by actively involving families and caregivers in a cooperative and nurturing network focused on the child. Trust and open communication between teachers and families lead to shared educational goals, reinforcing student learning at home and school (Choquette et al., 2024). Interpersonal theory further supports the idea that

reciprocity in teacher-child relationships fosters positive emotions and emotional stability, enhancing students' development and engagement (Horowitz & Strack, 2011; Split et al., 2022). ECPTIs can create inclusive learning environments that enhance student success and wellbeing by prioritizing relationship-building, cultural responsiveness, and family collaboration.

The family significantly influences students' cognitive and emotional development, with ECPTIs' actions and students' observations influencing their behavior. However, recent changes have led to ECPTIs' time constraints and less involvement in school activities (Polat & Bayindir, 2022). Self-regulation grows as ECPTIs manage the processes that the students are developing by guiding or modeling them. It gives them control over their emotional responses and enables them to start achieving personal goals. Self-regulation in childhood is essential for adjusting to the demands of the environment in which any student interacts. In other words, it promotes effective decision-making and decisions that are grounded in reflection rather than emotional impulse (Polat & Bayindir, 2022; Saada, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Students' self-regulated learning, emotional self-regulation, and behavior have all been repeatedly associated with parental involvement in the classroom.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Personal, educational, social, and school barriers that affect parental involvement are identified in the literature (Gedfie et al., 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2023). Personal barriers may involve parents' work obligations, lack of confidence in supporting with homework, or negative previous educational experiences. Academic barriers may result

from limited parental awareness of the curriculum or school expectations. Social barriers, like language differences, cultural misinterpretations, or socioeconomic challenges, could prevent successful involvement. Moreover, a low education level may hinder parental involvement. These complex problems highlight the necessity for inclusive and culturally responsive (Gedfie et al., 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2023).

Personal Barriers

The level of participation of caregivers is affected by how they see their ability to help their children, how empowered they feel, and how sure they are of their abilities (Hornby & Lafaele, 2023). Several variables affect how involved parents are in their children's education, and these factors are all linked. One of the most important factors is how they see their role in helping their child learn and grow. If parents think they can make a real difference, they are more likely to get involved, whether it is by helping with chores, talking to teachers, or making sure their children have enjoyable and informative activities at home. A parent's feeling of confidence is also very important. If parents are sure of their knowledge and abilities, they are more likely to be involved in making decisions and speaking up for their child's educational needs. Also, how ready they are to participate is affected by their level of self-efficacy, or how sure they are of their skills. If parents aren't sure they can do it, they might not want to participate because they fear their efforts will not work (Hornby & Lafaele, 2023). However, parents are more likely to get past these problems and become more involved in their child's education if they are given the right tools, support, and help from teachers and other adults in the community. Building a supportive environment that gives parents the confidence they need and the

tools they need can ultimately lead to more involvement and good results for children (Gedfie et al., 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2023).

Educational Barriers

Parents' educational status may significantly impact their engagement in their children's education, both in school and at home (Gedfie et al., 2021). Parents with no formal education may have challenges in assisting with schoolwork, comprehending educational materials, or effectively engaging with teachers and school staff. Often, these issues arise from a lack of self-assurance regarding their academic capabilities, resulting in hesitation or avoidance of engagement in school-related activities. Some individuals may hesitate to participate because of concerns about disclosing their challenges with literacy or numeracy, fearing shame or disapproval from educators, fellow parents, or even their own children (Yang et al., 2023). This hesitance can establish a chain reaction where less parental engagement leads to decreased educational assistance at home, potentially affecting children's progress in school and self-esteem. Moreover, language obstacles, especially for parents who are non-native speakers, can significantly limit their capacity to interact with school communications, navigate educational systems, or advocate for their child's needs. To address these problems, schools and educators must adopt inclusive solutions, like literacy assistance programs, multilingual resources, and accessible communication techniques, to empower parents and enhance collaboration between families and schools (Gedfie et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Social Barriers

The financial circumstances of parents significantly limit their participation (Yang et al., 2023). Multiple employment, rigorous work schedules, dual-income homes, and exclusive financial responsibility for children are recognized barriers to engagement. Research has demonstrated that cultural and linguistic obstacles impede migrant parents' communication and involvement in educational settings, as well as their capacity to assist their children with homework (Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023). While all caregivers have difficulties in engaging with schools, low-income moms experience additional barriers that prevent their involvement in their children's education. The absence of school involvement could trigger feelings of feeling helpless, humiliation, and guilt (Yang et al., 2023). ECPTIs that do not accommodate parents will prevent them from visiting and sharing their concerns about their children.

Effective Communication

Communication research is presented in this section of the review of the relevant literature in several ways. Some literature on the role of communication in teacher-student relationships is presented. Proactive communication strategies are also included.

Communication

Effective communication is fundamental to strong relationships between ECPTIs and families. It fosters trust, mutual comprehension, and cooperative decision-making in the child's best interests. Nonetheless, ECPTIs may encounter many obstacles that hinder their capacity to interact successfully with families. Antony-Newman (2024) emphasized that challenges occur in effectively conveying information, addressing parental concerns

with sensitivity, and adapting communication strategies to accommodate diverse audiences. A significant concern is the insufficient expertise of ECPTIs in facilitating professional, reciprocal engagement with families. They lack the confidence or ability to articulate educational methods, child development difficulties, or classroom challenges in a manner that is both comprehensible and respectful of families' viewpoints. This may result in misunderstanding or misinterpretation, particularly when vocabulary or technical terminology is used without sufficient clarification (Antony-Newman 2024). When issues or disputes emerge, such as differences on behavior management or educational objectives, ECPTIs may find it challenging to engage in these discussions respectfully. In the absence of training in active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution, they may unintentionally increase tensions or seem dismissive of parents' concerns. These communication failures can undermine trust and diminish parental involvement in the educational process (Antony-Newman, 2024; Smith et al., 2022).

Role of Communication in Teacher-Student Relationships

Effective communication serves as the foundation for building strong relationships in early childhood education. ECPTIs must develop clear, consistent, and compassionate communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, to engage with students' families (Özcan et al., 2023). This includes actively listening, addressing students' and families' needs, and fostering trust and understanding. Non-verbal communication, including facial expressions, body language, and vocal tone, is essential in ensuring that young students feel secure, appreciated, and understood. Honest and respectful communication fosters children's linguistic development, behavioral

regulation, and social skills, enhancing positive relationships within the classroom. For ECPTIs, learning how to navigate through difficult conversations, such as addressing behavioral concerns, communicating student progress with families, or resolving conflicts, is important for developing confidence as future teachers. By fostering strong communication skills, ECPTIs can create a supportive learning environment that fosters relationships and enhances overall student wellbeing. According to the NAEYC (2022), teachers' goals should be strategic in supporting children and are shaped by the children's active engagement.

Proactive Communication Strategies

ECPTIs can strengthen their relationships with students' families, ultimately enhancing learning experiences and emotional wellbeing if they prioritize effective communication, proactive engagement, and structured support.

ECPTIs can use direct proactive practices to build trust and connection, such as:

- (a) Offering praise and encouragement.
- (b) Providing guidance and feedback.
- (c) Acknowledging students' feelings and efforts.
- (d) Engaging in one-on-one interactions to better understand each student (Split et al., 2022).

Indirect practices like classroom management strategies, fostering a secure and structured environment, and modeling social-emotional coping skills help create a supportive atmosphere for students (Split et al., 2022).

The Role of Parental Involvement in Education

Parental involvement is a critical factor in enhancing students' academic success and overall development. It includes understanding child development, engaging in school communication, volunteering, supporting home-based learning, decision-making, and collaborating with the school community (Kim & Bryan, 2022). Parents who actively participate in their child's education foster positive interactions at school and contribute to their child's academic achievement and social-emotional growth. Educators who develop strong relationships with families demonstrate greater confidence, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward family involvement in student learning. These relationships create a supportive educational environment, reinforcing the role of families in enhancing children's learning experiences (Brennan & Packard, 2022).

Parental engagement can be categorized into several key areas (Epstein, 1991, 2010; McDowell et al., 2018). Helping parents understand child development and build confidence. In Epstein's concept, parenting represents the school's function in assisting families in establishing successful parenting abilities and enhancing their comprehension of child development, particularly with learning and behavior. It involves establishing a solid foundation at home that fosters children's education, emotional wellbeing, and social development.

Parenting includes assisting families in establishing a home environment that fosters learning by improving their understanding of child development, school readiness, and behavior management. It also includes assisting schools in acknowledging and addressing the different backgrounds, strengths, and needs of families to enhance home-

school connections (Fan & Chen, 2001). Communication emphasizes the establishment of strong connections that are reciprocal between families and ECPTIs via consistent, open, and culturally responsive channels. Communication guarantees that parents stay informed of school initiatives, student advancement, and methods to facilitate learning, while simultaneously urging programs to take note and appreciate parental contributions (Brennan & Packard, 2022). This, in turn, encourages parents to engage in school activities while supporting learning beyond the classroom through discussions, reading, and goal setting.

Epstein et al. (1997) proposed the school-family-community partnership model, highlighting the combined efforts of schools, families, and communities to impact children's development and learning as interconnected spheres of influence. This idea proposed that educators establish family-school environments. Participants expressed that families should cultivate educational home settings, and communities should promote possibilities like schools and services for families. When schools, families, and communities collaborate to enhance student academic achievement, they emphasize the significance of education. Families and communities could communicate the value of their educations and accomplishments, within their schools and families. Participants expressed their beliefs that the inability of one side to fulfill the expectations of the other creates conflict between schools and parents. Schools are unable to offer complete support for student development without effective engagement with parents.

Influence on Student Achievement

Research consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between parental involvement and student success (Boonk et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2020). Active parental engagement has been linked to higher academic performance, improved student motivation, and increased school participation (Erdem & Kaya, 2020). Learning occurs not only in schools but also at home and community environments, making parental engagement a vital component of a child's educational journey (Ma et al., 2020).

Active parental involvement in a child's education through supporting home learning activities, maintaining communication with educators, or engaging in school functions enhances students' cognitive abilities, social-emotional regulation, and attitudes towards learning (Brennan & Packard, 2022; Ma et al., 2020). Additionally, such involvement reduces differences between school expectations and home experiences, cultivating a sense of continuity and support that strengthens student confidence and academic determination. Research indicates that schools that implement programs to engage families witness improved student outcomes across various socio-economic and cultural demographics. By fostering a collaborative educational environment where parents feel empowered to assist their children, schools can maintain positive influences on student achievement and overall wellbeing (Brennan & Packard, 2022; Kim & Bryan, 2022).

Need for Training

Many ECPTIs report feeling ill-equipped to build strong relationships with students and provide the necessary support (Antony-Newman, 2024). They express a need for additional coaching on how to effectively communicate and engage with both students' families. Developing these skills is crucial, as they enhance empathy, cultural competence, and professional communication, preparing ECPTIs for their future roles as educators. As ECPTIs are currently still in training, they have stated that they do not possess the necessary practical experience to effectively manage complex relationships with students' families (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Collaborating with families from many backgrounds provides challenges, particularly when ECPTIs lack cultural proficiency or expertise in inclusive strategies (Antony-Newman, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). These differences can affect communication patterns, expectations on family participation, ideas about child-rearing, and perceptions of the teacher's role. Inadequate preparation may hinder ECPTIs from accurately interpreting and responding to culturally established habits or beliefs, resulting in misunderstandings or unintended exclusion of families from the educational process. Language barriers increase engagement efforts, since ECPTIs struggle to create trust and develop meaningful relationships when they cannot communicate effectively with families who speak a different language. This may lead to restricted family involvement, less possibilities for joint decision-making, and overlooked insights about the child's home environment and cultural background (Smith et al., 2022; Spark guide, 2024).

Establishing Professional Boundaries

ECPTIs may find it challenging to balance warmth and professionalism while interacting with families. ECPTIs encounter difficulties in achieving an optimal balance between warmth and professionalism during interactions with families. Establishing strong, trustworthy relationships with families is essential for effective early childhood education; however, the informal and emotionally sensitive nature of early learning environments can occasionally confuse the distinction between personal and professional duties (Brennan & Packard, 2022). As emerging professionals, ECPTIs are still refining their comprehension of what defines suitable limits in family-teacher relationships. While they may be enthusiastic about engaging with families and showcasing their care and dedication, a lack of clear supervision or expertise can occasionally result in over-sharing, inappropriate familiarity, or confusing job expectations.

Teacher education programs are essential in assisting ECPTIs in cultivating the judgment and interpersonal skills required to navigate situations that may arise. Interns can cultivate the ability to convey empathy, care, and respect while establishing and upholding suitable professional boundaries using reflective practice, mentorship, and explicit ethical rules. Establishing this balance is essential for fostering healthy, effective relationships with families and for demonstrating professionalism in early learning environments (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Confidence in Relationship Development

ECPTIs experience uncertainty over their capacity to cultivate trust with families, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as behavioral difficulties or

developmental issues they might observe (Antony-Newman, 2024; Spark guide, 2024). It is important because understanding the elements that strengthen teacher efficacy is essential for cultivating positive relationships with students' families. Teachers who possess a high sense of confidence in their capacity to include and assist every student are more likely to establish deeper and positive relationships with both their students and their families, unlike ECPTIs who sometimes do not exhibit a high sense of confidence (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Challenges Faced by Immigrant Families

Cultural differences between immigrant parents and early childhood professionals can create misunderstandings, reduce confidence, and hinder effective communication (Smith et al., 2022; Spark guide, 2024; Yeomans-Maldonado et al., 2021). Immigrant parents often encounter greater challenges in collaborating with educators, resulting in lower engagement levels compared to non-immigrant families. Implementing culturally responsive practices and providing training in cultural competency can help bridge these gaps, strengthening parent-school relationships and improving student outcomes. Maintaining the native language at home benefits dual language learners, as supported by research on language use in students' households (Smith et al., 2022; Yeomans-Maldonado et al., 2021). Smith et al. (2022) explored immigrant parents' perspectives on education and their involvement with their children, emphasizing the crucial role of language and communication in fostering effective

parent-teacher relationships. Key findings of the study showed how important language and parent-teacher communication are.

Strengthening Family-Teacher Relationships

Strong family-teacher partnerships create a reliable support structure for students, fostering engagement and academic success (Epstein, 1995; Lewis et al., 2023). By prioritizing effective communication and collaboration, schools can bridge the gap between families and educators, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Developing trust and mutual respect between families and teachers is essential in creating a welcoming school climate that values diverse cultural backgrounds and promotes meaningful parental involvement (Spark guide, 2024).

When families realize their voices have been heard and valued, they are encouraged to partake in school events, involve themselves in their child's educational journey, and cooperate with educators to address any difficulties their children may encounter. Moreover, strong partnerships facilitate the continual reinforcement of educational objectives at home, resulting in enhanced academic performance and social-emotional growth (Yang et al., 2023). Schools that engage parents via seminars, open dialogues, and culturally sensitive practices may strengthen their relationships with families and foster an understanding of student achievement. By promoting a collaborative strategy, educators and parents together help children holistically, guaranteeing they obtain the motivation and resources essential for success both academically and personally (Lewis et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL involves the acquisition and application of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral skills that help individuals regulate emotions, set and achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions (Özcan et al., 2023). SEL is essential for both students and educators, as it supports emotional regulation, stress management, and conflict resolution in various settings. SEL plays a critical role in early childhood education, as young children develop foundational emotional and social skills during this stage. ECPTIs must understand and implement SEL practices to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment where children feel valued and emotionally secure (Miller & Herman, 2021). Educators are expected to model appropriate emotional regulation and social behaviors, helping students develop positive relationships and enhance their overall wellbeing. According to the NAEYC (2022), early childhood education also significantly influences social and emotional development. Strong self-esteem, self-control, and self-regulation are more likely to develop in children who have positive and nurturing experiences during their early years. They are also more likely to possess effective communication skills and healthy relationships, which will be beneficial to them throughout their lives.

Teacher-Student Relationships and SEL

Strong teacher-student relationships are fundamental to early childhood education. Research highlights that positive, emotionally supportive interactions between educators and students lead to improved emotional regulation, academic

achievement, social development, and reduced behavioral issues (Miller & Herman, 2021; Özcan et al., 2023). When teachers are sensitive and responsive, students feel safe, engaged, and motivated to learn, and positive emotions displayed by the teacher are also supportive of student engagement (Bonnell, 2021; Wang et al., 2024).

CASEL provides a foundational framework for this study, facilitating a focused investigation of key factors that shape teachers' experiences in implementing SEL practices in early childhood education settings (CASEL, 2021). By integrating SEL strategies and fostering nurturing teacher-student relationships, educators can enhance children's emotional growth, social skills, and overall learning experience. This underscores the importance of teacher training in SEL, ensuring ECPTIs are well-equipped to support students' emotional and academic development. Reciprocity plays an important role in trust, emotional respect, and cohesion in interpersonal relationships, producing significant effects on communication and cooperation and researchers discovered that students' wellbeing and their satisfaction with interpersonal connections are important for fostering healthy relationships between educators and learners (Prouska et al., 2023., Salavera & Usan, 2021). Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown to improve students' emotional intelligence. This improvement is facilitated by increased levels of openness and empathy among students, indicating that positive relationships foster important social-emotional skills. Research suggested that strong attachment relationships reduce behavioral problems. Students with strong relationships display fewer behavioral issues and show enhanced social adjustment. Positive indicators of teacher-student relationships comprise closeness, support, liking, warmth, and trust

(Bonnell, 2021; Nulman & Alkalay, 2023). Research emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships for influencing children's academic achievement, mental health, and interactions with others. These findings suggested the need for strategies that emphasize the development of secure and supportive teacher-student relationships (Nulman & Alkalay, 2023)

The Significance of Early Childhood Education

Research consistently highlights the significant impact of high-quality early childhood education on children's cognitive and social-emotional development. Effective early childhood programs not only enhance cognitive skills but also foster essential social-emotional competencies, which are critical for future success (Brennan & Packard, 2022). Developing strong relationships between teachers, students, and families is essential in early childhood education, as it enhances student engagement, wellbeing, and learning outcomes. A key element in student engagement is the perceived high quality of the teacher-student relationship, characterized by the student feeling positively supported, cared for, and experiencing a sense of belonging by ECPTIs. Strategies for student engagement that enhance both behavioral and intellectual commitment towards achievement serve as instruments for institutions to forecast dropout rates and address disconnection from education as students progress (Bonnell, 2021; Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). According to the NAEYC (2022), teachers' goals should be strategic in supporting children and are shaped by the children's active engagement. Research showed that reciprocal interactions between educators and students enhance relationships of attachment. This reciprocity cultivates a sense of belonging and trust,

essential for effective learning environments. Further, early relationships with caregivers are the basis for the development of relationships as infants grow to adulthood (Bonnell, 2021; Bowlby, 1951).

Relationship-Oriented Professional Development

A relationship-centered approach to professional development in early childhood education emphasizes collaboration among educators, caregivers, students, and families. This method not only strengthens teacher-family partnerships but also enhances the effectiveness of professional development initiatives by promoting knowledge-sharing and best practices (Barron et al., 2020).

When ECPTIs engage in ongoing, meaningful interactions with families, they acquire vital knowledge about students' distinct background, learning styles, and their developmental needs. This profound comprehension enables ECPTIs to tailor their pedagogical approaches, fostering more adaptive and inclusive educational settings. In addition, collaborative professional development cultivates a feeling of collective accountability when families and ECPTIs collaborate to enhance children's development both in educational settings and at home. Integrating relationship-building into training programs via workshops, mentoring, and reflective practices enables ECPTIS to develop important skills in communication, cultural competency, and family involvement. This strategy promotes teacher effectiveness and fosters robust school communities where students grow in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and mutual support (Nulman & Alkalay, 2023)

The Role of the Teacher Intern

ECPTIs are in a crucial stage of professional growth, transitioning from theoretical learning to practical application. Their ability to build and maintain strong relationships with students' families is essential for creating nurturing and responsive learning environments. According to the NAEYC (2022), teachers' goals should be strategic in supporting children and are shaped by the children's active engagement. ECPTIs provide the educational foundational skills that develop students' essential knowledge and skills crucial throughout their academic careers. In the 19th century, women taught formal education to young children in kindergarten skills, including reading, writing, and basic arithmetic, in their homes (NAEYC, 2022). Today's early childhood programs have evolved with ongoing research and developments in technology, neuroscience, and child development (NAEYC, 2022).

ECPTIs are at a critical phase of professional growth, moving from academic knowledge to practical application. Their capacity to establish and sustain strong relationships with students' families is crucial for building, nurturing, and responsive learning environments that facilitate students' holistic development. ECPTIs function as learners as well as teachers, acquiring practical experience while implementing pedagogical principles in actual classroom environments (Nulman & Alkalay, 2023). Their job is crucial in promoting social-emotional growth, cognitive development, and essential academic abilities in young learners.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2022) asserted that effective teachers are intentional and purposeful in fostering children's

development, with their objectives influenced by students' active participation. This concept emphasizes the significance of relationship-centered pedagogy, whereby teachers align with students' unique needs, interests, and familial contexts to foster inclusive and learning experiences (Nulman & Alkalay, 2023). Emerging professionals, such as ECPTIs, must integrate developmentally appropriate practices with responsive strategies to cultivate trust with student's families.

ECPTIs provide fundamental skills that enable students to acquire essential knowledge essential for their future academic achievement. They introduce students to basic reading, numeracy, and problem-solving abilities via play-based learning, guided instruction, and active involvement (Choquette et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). ECPTIs help promote good behavior modeling, emotional regulation, and social interaction skills, which are important to children's long-term wellbeing and readiness in diverse educational environments.

Today, early childhood programs emphasize inclusive education, acknowledging the different cultural, language, and developmental backgrounds of students. ECPTIs are expected to adjust to these changing educational environments by implementing strategies that promote individual learning, culturally appropriate pedagogy, and family involvement initiatives (Nulman & Alkalay, 2023). Moreover, technological advancements and digital learning tools have transformed the responsibilities of early childhood educators, requiring that ECPTIs develop proficiency in using educational technology to support student learning while maintaining the importance of hands-on, experiential play.

Role of Teacher Preparation Programs

Research highlights the critical role of teacher preparation programs in developing ECPTIs' capacity to interact, collaborate, and communicate proficiently with families. These programs establish the basis for cultivating the knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills essential for fostering respectful, inclusive, and responsive relationships with families from many backgrounds. Well-structured teacher education programs offer ECPTIs systematic chances to examine family dynamics, cultural diversity, communication skills, and ethical concerns important to family involvement.

Several researchers suggested that purposeful coursework, field experiences, and reflective practice integrated into teacher preparation programs may significantly improve ECPTIs' confidence and proficiency in engaging with families (Choquette et al., 2024; Nulman & Alkalay, 2023). Interns have gained insight into the complex nature of family life and the significance of establishing authentic partnerships grounded in mutual respect and common objectives for children's development. Strategies used in teacher preparation programs include such strategies as role-playing, reflections on case studies, community-based initiatives, and supervised placements.

Research Findings

Research highlighted the essential role of relationship-building abilities and SEL competencies for the success and wellbeing of ECPTIs. The beliefs and skills that ECPTIs possess regarding SEL significantly impact their preparedness and effectiveness in the classroom (Choquette et al., 2024). A relationship-oriented approach to professional development enhances the collaboration and execution of educational

activities, allowing ECPTIs to better connect with students, families, and colleagues. Lewis et al. (2023) further established a direct connection between the quality of family-teacher interactions and students' participation in early childhood education, highlighting the crucial role of strong, supportive relationships in promoting student engagement, and educators' styles of attachment significantly influence their relationships with students. Educators with secure attachment styles typically build better relationships, resulting in better student engagement and learning outcomes. Secure attachments are associated with increased student engagement. Students are more motivated to engage actively in learning activities when they observe educators as encouraging and trustworthy (Bonnell, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023).

Additionally, inclusive education is vital, as parents recognize the importance of educational settings that support all students, regardless of their abilities (Puig & Evenson, 2023). Sharing familial experiences of inclusive education with educators and ECPTIs fosters collaboration and strengthens the development of adaptable programs and policies that meet the diverse needs of students' families. This focus on inclusion and responsiveness, along with utilizing students' strengths, contributes to the ongoing improvement of early childhood education environments.

Gaps in the Literature

While existing research underscored the significance of relationship-building skills, SEL, and family involvement in early childhood education, there remain notable gaps that require further exploration (Haslip & Terry, 2022). Research indicated that tailored SEL lesson planning can effectively enhance social-emotional outcomes in

young students, especially when combined with teacher professional development. However, there is a need for more research on how ECPTIs' interpersonal abilities and SEL beliefs impact the practical application of these behaviors in real classroom settings (Sutton et al., 2020). It is crucial to explore efficient professional development approaches that enhance relationship-building skills and explore the long-term impacts of these methods across different cultural contexts. Understanding the background and significance of these skills is essential, and future research should focus on how teacher preparation programs can be improved to better equip ECPTIs with the necessary skills to establish and maintain positive relationships with students' families. This would ultimately contribute to enhanced educational outcomes and a nurturing learning environment.

While there is substantial research on teacher-student and teacher-family relationships, challenges remain in understanding how these relationships evolve and persist across diverse educational settings. The importance of cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and social-emotional development in these relationships is well-documented, but further research is needed to understand their complexity (Özcan et al., 2023). Teacher preparation programs must adapt to better prepare ECPTIs for the relational demands of early childhood education. Future studies should address gaps in the literature, particularly focusing on the long-term influence of relational skills on both students' and teachers' professional development.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature emphasized the importance of relationship-building skills, SEL, and continuous professional development in supporting ECPTIs in developing and maintaining strong relationships with students' families.

Studies such as Choquette et al. (2024) emphasize how ECPTIs' interpersonal abilities and beliefs about SEL significantly influence their preparedness and effectiveness as educators. Strengthening these skills enables educators to create meaningful, collaborative relationships that promote both academic and social-emotional growth for students. The relationship-oriented approach to professional development, highlighted by Barron et al. (2020) and Lewis et al. (2023), underscored the importance of fostering supportive relationships among teachers, caregivers, students, and families. This approach not only enhances collaboration but also cultivates inclusive, communicative environments that drive higher student participation. The connection between family-teacher relationships and student engagement is well-established, indicating that strong family involvement contributes directly to improved educational outcomes. Key findings from previous research point to essential skills for ECPTIs to succeed in relationship-building:

Interpersonal skills are foundational for creating nurturing and effective classrooms and fostering positive connections with students' families that support both social-emotional and academic growth (Lewis et al., 2023).

Parental involvement is crucial for student achievement. Schools should promote family engagement by fostering an understanding of child development and encouraging

active participation in school-community partnerships (McDowell et al., 2018).

Positive family-teacher relationships foster an inclusive, supportive learning environment that enhances both the academic and socio-emotional development of students (Barron et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2023).

By cultivating these relationship-building and SEL competencies, ECPTIs can create supportive, effective learning environments that boost student wellbeing and academic success. Ongoing research and investment in these areas are critical for maintaining high standards in early childhood education and ensuring positive educational experiences for young students.

This study has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the relational competencies necessary for early childhood education by investigating factors like ECPTIs' preparedness and the unique needs of students' families. By identifying strategies to enhance teacher preparation, such as targeted family engagement and reflective learning practices, the study seeks to improve the quality of early childhood education and support the holistic development of students (Puig & Evenson, 2023). Relationship-building skills, ideas about SEL, and professional development are all essential elements in equipping ECPTIs for prosperous careers in early childhood education. ECPTIs may cultivate strong relationships with students' families to provide supportive and effective learning environments that enhance students' overall wellbeing and academic achievement (Barron et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2023). Ongoing research and investment in

these domains are important for improving the high standard of early childhood education and guaranteeing improved educational experiences for young children.

In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study will be discussed, focusing on addressing ECPTIs experiencing challenges in building effective relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation. The study explored the intern's experiences through interviews and reflective journaling, contributing to a clearer understanding of how ECPTIs can better establish and sustain meaningful relationships in diverse educational contexts.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families. A qualitative approach is best suited for this purpose as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' actual experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This is crucial given early childhood teachers' experiences and the complexity of the relationships between ECPTIs, students, and families in early childhood programs in Alberta. This is in line with my study's purpose of exploring ECPTIs' experiences of their successes, challenges, and resources needed to build relationships with children and their families in the Alberta. The qualitative study technique was appropriate for my topic as it enabled a thorough investigation of the complexities and dynamics of ECPTIs' interactions with students' families in early childhood programs. Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasized that qualitative research enables a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, which is essential for studying. This strategy is in line with my research problem, goal, and overall research questions since it focuses on participants' views and contextual aspects. I invited ECPTIs from different early childhood centers who are doing their practicum in Alberta. A qualitative study with interviews allowed me to acquire a thorough picture of the phenomenon concerning ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families. I conducted one-on-one interviews to collect interview data. I analyzed the data through coding to identify codes, patterns, and themes

(Saldaña 2021). My research methodology in Chapter 3 aligned with these aims, focusing specifically on addressing the details of the research design and the rationale experiences of the ECPTIs. I obtained insights into individuals' challenges and successes in building relationships with students' families, focusing on their individual experiences. Both Anthony-Newman (2024) and Levi (2019) identified that increasingly, international research indicates that ECPTIs have a sense of inadequacy in their ability to engage with students' families following the completion of their ITE programs. Most ECPTIs and teacher educators mentioned that parent engagement is important and underlined the urgent necessity to prepare teacher candidates to work with students' families. The effectiveness of early childhood education relies heavily on the establishment of relationships between teachers and families. I sought to comprehend the strategies ECPTIs utilize and the factors that influence their ability to make these relationships successful or not.

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval number 08-01-25-0560768, I used a basic qualitative research design to select a purposive sample of ECPTIs and collect data via one-on-one semi-structured interviews. In Chapter 3, I expand on the research design and rationale. In addition, the researcher's role will be discussed, including methodology, participant selection, and the data analysis process utilized for the study. I also discuss strategies utilized to address trustworthiness and ethical practices within the study.

Research Design and Rationale

Educational research utilizes two principal frameworks: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to identify patterns, develop hypotheses, and formulate predictions. It is often used to measure variables and establish their interrelationships (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). On the other hand, qualitative research concentrates on understanding the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of persons within their social environments. It aims to investigate complex phenomena with comprehensive data collection techniques, including interviews, observations, and document analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The research design that I did follow for this study was a basic qualitative study design with semistructured interviews. A basic qualitative approach was used because this methodology gives priority to the viewpoints and experiences of participants, enabling a thorough investigation of their actual experiences (Pervin et al., 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Qualitative research includes several approaches. One approach is phenomenology which concentrates on individuals lived experiences and helps in developing an understanding for the basis of an event (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Another approach is grounded theory that seeks to develop theories based on carefully collected and examined data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While grounded theory is important in developing new theoretical frameworks, it was unsuitable for this study as it is informed by established theories. I did not use a case study approach because following this method requires a comprehensive examination of a specific system or case over time

and is less suitable to analyze general patterns among several ECPTIs' experiences (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ethnography focuses on the examination of cultures and communities by immersion and observation; therefore, it was not ideal for this study because the primary interest is relational experiences within educational settings. I also considered using narrative inquiry, however, because it investigates individual narratives to understand their interpretation of experiences it was not suitable because this study is focused with generating comprehensive personal narratives, but rather on the relationship-building techniques of ECPTIs experiences.

The basic qualitative study was appropriate for my topic as it enables a thorough investigation of the experiences of pre-service teachers' interactions with students' families in early childhood programs. Understanding the complexity of the relationships between ECPTIs and students' families in early childhood programs in Alberta is essential. Basic qualitative study prioritizes understanding interns' views, problems, and strategies using comprehensive, descriptive data, yielding profound insights into their interpersonal and professional development throughout internships (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A basic qualitative study was in line with my research problem, goal, and overall research questions since it focuses on participants' views and contextual aspects. I did invite ECPTIs from three different early childhood teacher preparation programs in Alberta which allowed me to acquire a thorough picture of the phenomenon being investigated and understand the substance of their experiences, including their problems, successes, and perceptions of what is required to establish good relationships with students' families (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). I did a basic qualitative study because I

used only one set of data from interviews that I conducted with 12 ECPTIs. I employed purposeful sampling by interviewing ECPTIs because I aimed to understand their perceptions (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: What are ECPTIs' experiences (challenges, and successes) in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

RQ 2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta

A qualitative design can help me, the researcher, discover particular and context-dependent demands, which are typically difficult to measure. Relationship building entails emotions, perceptions, and interpersonal dynamics (Choquette et al., 2024), all of which are best recorded via qualitative data. These elements encompass local legislation, community dynamics, and demographic aspects that might impact the way ECPTIs engage with students' families.

The study also determined the resources that ECPTIs perceive as essential for improving their capacity to establish relationships. By comprehending the necessary resources, the research can provide suggestions to educational institutions and community groups to assist ECPTIs in fulfilling their responsibilities. Newman (2024) explained in his study that most participants maintained the belief that parents have a fundamental role in their students' education, particularly in the home environment. Researchers also believe that teachers should recognize and appreciate the contributions that families can make, creating opportunities for their knowledge, language, and culture

to be incorporated into the classroom. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was the primary tool for data gathering, interpretation, and analysis. To learn more about participants' experiences and perspectives, use open-ended, semi-structured questions. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), it is important for researchers to consider thoughtful, ongoing, authentic, and respectful engagement and relationship cultivation with research participants before, during, and after the research takes place.

Building Rapport and Participant Engagement

One of the fundamental roles of a qualitative researcher is to establish trust and rapport with participants. The initial connection is essential for gaining meaningful insights and capturing authentic experiences. I did foster a secure and supportive environment in which participants felt free to share their ideas and experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This included cultivating relationships with participants, facilitating open conversation and active listening, and refraining from posing leading questions or making assumptions. The development of relationships is a gradual, intricate, multifaceted, and essential process important for qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researchers must be active listeners and observers, keeping an open mind of key attributes to facilitate honest and open dialogue (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Some ways to address

research bias was through audio taping the interviews, which is common in qualitative research (Bergelson et al., 2022).

Reflexivity and Self-Awareness

Researchers assume a distinct position in qualitative research, as their opinions, biases, and viewpoints might affect the study's findings. Consequently, reflexivity is essential. Recognizing and critically evaluating one's preexisting beliefs and assumptions is crucial for upholding methodological rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researchers should concentrate on the norms, values, and anticipated behaviors manifesting in the preschool environment (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participating in reflective practices compels researchers to consistently examine their motivations, biases, and interpretations about the decision to pursue comments during the study process.

Maintaining Ethical Standards

As a researcher, maintaining ethical standards is paramount. Researchers must preserve ethical duties by respecting participants' rights, obtaining informed consent, and preserving confidentiality. Upholding integrity in the distribution of findings and recognizing the contributions of participants and stakeholders fosters confidence and credibility in the research process and its results. The research process was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights and welfare. Informed consent was collected from every participant before data collection commenced. Confidentiality was ensured by safe data management and the anonymization of participant data. Ethical permission was secured from the Ethics Committee, and the study adhered to rules to reduce harm and guarantee transparency.

This research contributes to the expansion of knowledge by addressing a critical gap in the literature in the understanding of ECPTIs' relationships with students' families. Through innovative methodological approaches and an emphasis on diverse cultural contexts, the study advances theoretical frameworks and offers practical insights that can inform policy and practice. Furthermore, the findings will serve as a foundation for future research, fostering ongoing dialogue and exploration in the field of early childhood education.

Methodology

A basic qualitative study methodology gives priority to the viewpoints and experiences of participants, enabling a thorough investigation of their actual experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), qualitative methodology is best suited for the problem, purpose, and research questions in this study. Qualitative methodology allowed me to collect research data relevant to exploring relationships between students' families in early childhood programs in Alberta. This is in line with my study's purpose of exploring ECPTIs' perceptions of their successes, challenges, and resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. The qualitative study is appropriate for my topic as it enables a thorough investigation of the complexities and dynamics of ECPTIs with students' families in early childhood programs. The qualitative methodology was in line with my research problem, goal, and overall research questions since it focused on participants' views and contextual aspects.

ECPTIs from three different early childhood teacher preparation programs in Alberta were recruited to participate in the study. Qualitative research is an exploratory

investigation of a social phenomenon that is conducted within a natural setting through observations, descriptions, and analysis of participants' behaviors in addition to perspectives for the purpose of understanding a phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2020). A basic qualitative study with interviews allowed me to acquire a thorough picture of the phenomenon being investigated. I conducted interviews with 12 ECPTIs to collect interview data. I analyzed the data through coding to identify codes, patterns, categories, and themes (Saldaña, 2021), and the data was analyzed using an inductive approach that enabled me, as the sole researcher, to gain the answers to the research questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

I conducted a basic qualitative study to provide a comprehensive examination of participants' perspectives, emotions, and individual meanings, which are crucial for understanding the complex relationships involved in establishing relationships between ECPTIs and families, and a comprehensive, descriptive insights into real-world experiences, contrary to quantitative methods that emphasize numerical data. A basic qualitative study is especially significant in early childhood education, as relationships are shaped by cultural, emotional, and environmental influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Participant Selection

Participants fulfilled the following requirements to be in line with my study questions: ECPTIs were (a) enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE), (b) currently enrolled in an internship in a preschool program, and (c) working directly with early childhood students. The ECPTIs may be employed at the school or program, and still in a college or university program of study. Participants were ECPTIs.

who were in an accredited program. These ECPTIs did have an on-site mentor and were supervised by college or university faculty.

The sample size, which was planned to be 12 ECTPIs, was specified before the study to support the achievement of generalizing results (see Burkholder et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was used since it enabled me to target knowledge areas and find participants who possess information relevant to the research problem. Ravitch and Carl (2021) discussed purposeful sampling, which, when used, allows researchers to purposefully choose participants in research for certain reasons. This was relevant to my research since it enabled me to get comprehensive data on the topic. Qualitative research is where purposeful sampling is most frequently implemented (Campbell et al., 2020; Dul, 2024).

I planned to conduct interviews with 12 ECPTIs to collect interview data. Hennink et al. (2022) suggested that 12 participants may adequately cover all significant aspects of the phenomenon and potentially achieve saturation, which is the point at which further interviews yield no new insights. Upon obtaining IRB permission from Walden University for my project, I started the recruitment of 12 volunteers using public electronic emails and social media platforms.

Instrumentation

For data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews as the only data source to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families. I used open-ended questions followed by prompts as needed to elicit responses from participants (see Appendix B). This was complemented by a reflective journal that I kept

and referred to so that my bias was kept in check. During the interview process, I did use an audio tape to capture the exact words the participants were saying. I used Zoom for the interview, but I kept my camera off and only recorded the audio. Each participant agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of the study. Based on feedback from a panel of experts in teacher education who reviewed the self-developed instrument for this study, this data collection instrument provided sufficient data to address the research questions. However, if further interviews were needed to reach saturation, the interviews would be arranged through continued recruitment of volunteers who meet the criteria for participation in the study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

Participants fulfilled the following requirements to be in line with my study questions, ECPTIs were enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE), were currently enrolled in an internship in a preschool program and working directly with students, they might be employed at the program but still interns, they had an onsite mentor, they were supervised by college faculty, and the program was accredited. Before collecting data, I sought approval from the IRB at Walden University. Butin (2020) explained that the IRB committee was designed to ensure that researchers meet and maintain ethical guidelines and intrude on an individual's rights. I did follow the local district's IRB protocol to gain access to potential participants. Upon approval from both entities, I uploaded a flyer on social media stating the purpose of the study to

potential participants. This allowed the participants to participate from within Alberta, without leaving their homes.

The participation requirements for my study were included in the advertisement, along with my email address at Walden University, for interested individuals to respond. This study explored the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families during their internships. Eligible participants were enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE), were currently enrolled in an internship in a preschool program and working directly with students, they might be employed at the program but still interns, they had an onsite mentor, they were supervised by college faculty, and the program was accredited. Upon receiving notification of the volunteer's interest in participation, I emailed them a sample of the interview questions along with the interview protocol (see Appendix B). I did correspond with the participants via email or text messaging. The interviews occurred via Zoom/or telephone and will last one hour, and the meeting/call was recorded. The information remains confidential. I employed a secure data storage mechanism and eliminated the identities of individuals, locations, and organizations. I did recruit 12ECPTIs to collect interview data.

In conducting this basic qualitative study, I complied with ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights and welfare. Informed consent forms were collected from every participant before data collection commences. Confidentiality was ensured by safe data management and the anonymization of participant data. Ethical permission was secured from the Ethics Committee, and the study adhered to rules to reduce harm and guaranteed transparency. All participants in the study were voluntary and free from

coercion, and I advised them that they may withdraw from the research at any moment. The study was to be conducted with confidentiality and ethical considerations. Any adverse effects were handled, and participants notified that they may withdraw from the research at any time if they wish to do so.

Participation

Participants were notified that interviews would last between 45 to 60 minutes, and the purpose of this study was to explore how pre-service teacher interns build relationships with students' families during their training. I invited participants to share their experiences in an interview. I did inform them that any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of individual interviewees. Interviews were conducted outside of work hours. I notified them that I am undertaking this research to acquire my Doctorate in Early Childhood Education from Walden University.

I employed a plan to initiate and conclude the interview, presenting identical questions to each participant consistently (see Appendix B). The interview questions were reviewed by three experts in the field to be sure they aligned with the research questions. I started by inviting the participants and introducing myself, along with the subject matter. I established rapport with each participant by inquiring about their name, interests, and day's status. My self-developed research instrument comprised of open-ended questions, follow-up inquiries, and prompts that guaranteed adequate data for addressing my research topics. The interview questions were reviewed by a panel of three

experts in teacher preparation who have conducted research and are knowledgeable about ethical research procedures. This research instrument incorporates open-ended questions and was followed by prompts that related to specific comments or responses by the participants to guarantee the collection of comprehensive data important to my research topics. I started with the simplest questions and thereafter progressed in complexity to ensure the participants' comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. I shared my first interview and transcript with my committee and waited for their feedback and approval before proceeding. All these actions were recorded in the checklist.

Data Collection

The collection and analysis of qualitative data require meticulous attention to detail and a systematic approach. Researchers employ various methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups to collect rich and contextual information. It is important to match the tool to the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When the participants were selected, their interviews were scheduled at their convenience over Zoom. As the researcher, I collected data from the researcher-produced instrument. The data was derived from semi-structured interviews with 12 volunteers who were selected from public emails and social media. The interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes to one hour and was audio recorded to ensure accurate information and then transcribed immediately. Upholding ethical standards and honoring participant autonomy are essential throughout this period. When transcribing the interviews, I did utilize the participants' actual words and proved the authenticity of construction by having my researcher-produced instrument verified for accuracy by other experts to limit internal

validity. As a researcher, I am responsible for assuring the ethical conduct of the study through obtaining informed consent from each participant, ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity, and being mindful of power relations, especially when working with ECPTIs who may feel compelled to engage.

Data Analysis Plan

The research question aligns with the conceptual framework and the interview questions. I have included the alignment of the conceptual framework, the research questions, and the interview questions (see Appendix B). I did gather qualitative data from online/phone interviews, which I did analyze using inductive analysis to (1) gather the data, (2) arrange the data, (3) coding process and (4) synthesize the data into themes (Saldaña 2021). In-depth analyses include classifying, categorizing, and identifying themes within the data to identify the most significant aspects that are helpful in theory development and knowledge enhancement. The data was collected from online interviews that were recorded and analyzed to develop codes, categories, and themes (Burkholder et al., 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2022), the reliability of coding thematic analysis represents positivist qualitative research, since it prioritizes methodologies that guarantee objectivity, dependability, and accuracy of coding while minimizing researchers' bias. I collected the qualitative data from online interviews that I analyzed by using thematic analysis to (1) compile the data, (2) organize the data, (3) sort it into codes (4) compile the data into themes (Burkholder et al., 2020).

I transcribed the data by writing down the participants' answers to the interview questions word for word from the audio tape after each interview. I listened again and

again to the audio to ensure accuracy in the transcription. While reading and rereading the data, I made notes in the transcript to identify potential codes. When I had a list of similar codes, I sorted them into patterns. Then I used pattern coding to find categories in the data from generated codes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Bingham, 2023).

I used Microsoft Word to organize the data. Each interview took about one hour. The data addressed the research topic, which corresponded with the interview questions presented in Appendix B. Cases that diverged from typical patterns or themes were recorded and rigorously examined to comprehend their context and importance. These examples were incorporated into the study as appropriate and presented publicly to offer a thorough and detailed picture of ECPTIs' experiences. Resolving inconsistent situations would increase the credibility and complexity of the study's results.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is assessed based on credibility, transferability, and dependability (Ahmed, 2024). The researcher must adhere to the interview methodology, protect participant safety, and accurately observe and evaluate the study's findings. Qualitative research must ensure trustworthiness by addressing dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability (Stahl et al., 2020).

Credibility

Credibility in this study was attained via extensive involvement with participants, facilitating a profound comprehension of their experiences in building relationships with students' families. Member checking did guarantee the proper representation of participants' perspectives. Member checking is useful in qualitative research that uses

interviews (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023). I did the interviews and evaluated the data until saturation was achieved, enhancing the findings' trustworthiness. The data-collecting method will be carefully specified, and the interview questions aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework. Data discrepancies enhance validity by presenting diverse views, ensuring that all data were examined consistently (Coleman, 2021).

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which a study's findings can be applied or adapted to multiple situations, locations, or people (Ahmed, 2024). In contrast to statistical generalization in quantitative research, transferability in qualitative research relies on providing comprehensive, detailed explanations that enable others to assess the validity of the results in specific circumstances. The use of rich descriptions that offered detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and their experiences may increase transferability. The purpose of this selection was to cover a wide variety of perspectives among pre-service teacher interns from different early childhood education environments. By clearly defining the study's setting and correlating findings with existing literature, the study will enable readers to determine the relevance of the conclusions to different situations. These strategies seek to improve the importance and relevance of the findings in guiding teacher training programs and practices across many educational contexts. I documented each step taken to complete my research and why it was done so that other researchers can follow my study if they wish to use it for their research. I made my

findings meaningful for others and describe the subjects, methods, and assumptions of the study in detail (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Ethical Procedures

Once I was granted approval from Walden University and given my IRB number, I began to recruit 12 participants for my study through public electronic emails from social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook within Alberta. My study on ECPTIs' relationships with student's families and ethical procedures focused on safeguarding participants' rights and ensuring research integrity. Informed consent was obtained. Clear and accessible information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits was communicated, highlighting voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, all personal data was anonymized and securely stored. They were emailed an informed consent form, which outlines the study, gives sample questions, and displays their rights as participants. They emailed me back the form stating, "I consent." The data comprising interviews was gathered via specified procedures (Creswell, 2024). Efforts were employed to acknowledge cultural diversity and mitigate prejudice, ensuring that participants feel honored and respected. The study aimed to safeguard participants' welfare while providing significant contributions to the profession by following these ethical norms.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the research design, participants, data collection, and analytical methodologies employed in the study. A qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the relationships that ECPTIs build with student's families throughout their

field experiences. Purposeful sampling was employed to choose volunteers capable of offering profound insights into the topic being studied. The methods of obtaining data were one-on-one interviews and a reflective journal that I kept. These strategies provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of their relationships with student's families. Chapter 3 further discussed my role as the researcher, which outlined the procedures for recruiting participants, maintaining confidentiality issues, addressing bias, and ethical concerns. Ethical issues, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, was prioritized to safeguard participants and maintain the study's integrity. Thematic analyses were employed to examine data for patterns and themes associated with relationship-building. The chapter finishes by discussing potential methodological restrictions and solutions to reduce them, therefore assuring the research's credibility and trustworthiness. In Chapter 4, I will present an analysis of data.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families. A qualitative approach was best suited for this purpose as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints and encounters, enabling a thorough investigation of their actual experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Understanding these dynamics was crucial about early childhood teachers' experiences and for grasping the complexity of the relationships between ECPTIs, students, and families in early childhood programs in Alberta. This was in line with my study's purpose of exploring ECPTIs' perceptions of their successes, challenges, and resources needed to build relationships with children's families in Alberta. Two research questions were used to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families, and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. These questions were appropriate to guide this basic qualitative study, addressing the problem that many ECPTIs face in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta.

RQ 1: What are ECPTIs' experiences (challenges, and successes) in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

RQ 2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

In this chapter, I have included the setting, the data collection, the data analysis, the results, along with the evidence of trustworthiness, as well as the summary.

Setting

No personal or organizational factors influenced the participants or their experiences throughout the research, nor the interpretation of its outcomes. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. The interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience in privacy via Zoom. Participants fulfilled the following requirements to be in line with my study questions, ECPTIs were enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE), were currently enrolled in an internship in a preschool program and working directly with students, they might be employed at the program but still interns, they had an onsite mentor, they were supervised by college faculty, and the program was accredited. Out of the 12 participants interviewed, three were male students and nine were female students, and six participants were pursuing their bachelor's degree, while six participants were pursuing their Diplomas. Five of the participants were employed at their childcare centres while pursuing their education. There were no unforeseen or unexpected occurrences that impacted or altered the interpretation of the research results. In table 1, I have used the alphanumeric codes for the participants, their level of education, level of practicum, their sex and their status.

Table 1*Research Participants*

Participants	Level of education studying	Level of practicum	Sex	Status
1BFS1	Bachelor's degree	4th semester	Female	Student
2BFSE4	Bachelor's degree	4th semester	Female	Employed
3BMS5	Bachelor's degree	3rd semester	Male	Student
4BFSE9	Bachelor's degree	3rd semester	Female	Employed
5BMS11	Bachelor's degree	4th semester	Male	Student
6BFSE12	Bachelor's degree	2nd semester	Female	Employed
1DFSE2	Diploma	3rd semester	Female	Employed
2DFS3	Diploma	3rd semester	Female	Student
3DMS6	Diploma	2nd semester	Male	Student
4DFS7	Diploma	4th semester	Female	Student
5DFSE8	Diploma	4th semester	Female	Employed
6DFS10	Diploma	4th semester	Female	Student

Data Collection

As a researcher, I am responsible for assuring the ethical conduct of the study through obtaining informed consent from each participant, ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Twelve participants engaged separately in a 45 to 60-minute interview using Zoom, which was recorded. I welcomed and thanked each participant and assured them that their information would be kept confidential. I recorded the information as well as the start and concluding times of the interviews. Before the interviews started, each participant was asked if they had any questions and each participant gave their consent to be interviewed and recorded before the interviews began. To ensure consistency in data collection, I conducted interviews with all participants using the same technique. Upholding ethical standards and honoring participant autonomy were essential throughout this period. The interviews were then transcribed by Zoom into audio text files, which I carefully reviewed by comparing the

text with the original audio file, ensuring word-for-word correctness (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each interview was then transferred to my codebook, where each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code to maintain confidentiality throughout the study (see Bingham, 2023).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study consisted of transcribing twelve audio recorded interviews. I began by loading all data onto a Word document, which later became my codebook. Every participant received an alphanumeric code to maintain the confidentiality of their information. After transcribing my interviews into a Word document, I color-coded words, phrases, and concepts that participants used when answering interview questions and often repeated during the individual interviews. Interviews were conducted over 8 weeks, from August 8, 2025 to September 30, 2025. I pre-coded data after I transcribed each interview. The audio recordings and consent forms will be kept in a password-protected file for 5 years, and the consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet. After all interview data had been transcribed, I then began the generation of initial codes, an important phase in the analysis of qualitative data (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). Upon completion of the initial codes, I began the generation of my secondary codes by carefully reviewing the precoding and initial codes. I summarized each interview and sent the summaries to the respective participant for member checking. Five of the twelve participants responded to the email and noted they were satisfied with what was written in their summaries. No participant responded with any requested changes.

Table 2*Examples of Codes*

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Family	4BFSE9	“Over time, I've learned how different strategies for myself are, and my mentor has said that they can see me coming out of my shell and trying harder to build those relationships and find ways to work with the family.”
Environment	1BFS1	“The environment speaks for itself because when I design those responsive environments, the children do when they engage, and there's no chaos.”
Language barriers	5BMS11	“One of the challenges is particularly when some parents and children don't speak English due to language barriers.”
	3BMS5	“One of the main challenges I face, especially, is a language barrier.”
Appropriate	4BFSE9	“I think as an educator, it's important to look at the strength-based approach education for children and also make sure that we have developmentally appropriate practice for all children.”
	6AFS10	“I have that confidence in talking to parents, you know, about anything.”
Confidence	2BFSE4	“My mentor always tries to remind me to give a conversation a constant conversation with the parents and also update them about the child's development progress. So, she tried to, um, cultivate my confidence as well.”
Cultural collaboration	4BFSE9	“We also offer opportunities for parents to come in and tell stories or talk about their own culture, or if we're talking about foods from different areas.”

Data were also examined using Saldaña’s (2021) qualitative coding methodology, which involved open coding to identify recurring ideas and patterns. The specified words or phrases were recorded to determine emerging patterns. Once I had a list of similar codes, I sorted them into patterns. Then I used pattern coding to find categories in the data from generated codes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Bingham, 2023). From these categories, thematic analysis was applied to identify emerging themes that revealed patterns and relationships within the data in relation to research questions (Bingham, 2023). Three themes emerged from the data to address the research questions: (1) ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication with families; (2) ECPTIs adopted an advocacy role during their internship; and (3) ECPTIs desired to improve

community engagement. Each theme captured key patterns and insights reflected in the participants' responses to the research questions.

Table 3

Examples of Categories and Patterns

Categories	Patterns	Participant	Excerpt
Communication in program of teacher development	Peer interaction	2BFSE4	"I've seen here in the childcare setting as we focus more on peer interaction, sharing stuff, communication, this all doesn't exist when you're like the only child."
	Mentor support	4BFSE9	"It's been really great to have the support and the feedback from my mentor."
Communication with families.	Support worker	3BMS5	"I had a situation where the child was showing signs of emotional distress during the transition. I could see that it might be helpful to talk to the family, but I wasn't sure how to approach."
	Transition	6BFSE12	"I have conversations with them about their children and about the day their child has had."
Collaboration with families	Conversations	5BMS11	"My centre, now where I'm doing my practicum, they have a dedicated family support worker who assists families."
		1AFE2	"I feel more comfortable initiating conversations not only with children but with their families."
Advocacy in program of teacher development	More materials	6AFS10	"I will be providing the time, space, and materials to the children according to their needs so they can thrive in that environment."
	Program safety		
	More guidance	2BFSE4	"What I need is more guidance when dealing with families."
	More practicum days		
More Accessibility	6BFSE12	"Once I started working there more often, having more practicum days, I found it easier."	

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore ECPTIs' experiences building relationships with students' families and to understand the resources needed to strengthen those relationships in Alberta. Two research

questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are ECPTIs' experiences in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

RQ2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

12 participants were interviewed, and interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience in privacy via Zoom. Data were collected from 12 ECPTIs who were enrolled in a training program for early childhood education (ECE), enrolled in an internship in an accredited preschool program and working directly with early childhood students and may have been employed at the school or program, and still in a college or university program of study. They also had an on-site mentor and were supervised by college or university faculty. Initial coding revealed a high frequency of codes such as support (133), family (91), environment (84), communication (55), challenges (53), language barriers (22), confidence (20), and culture (20). Participants centered their reflections on communication, relational work, and the contextual demands of family engagement. They highlighted how these factors influenced their interactions with families, revealing the complex challenges and opportunities encountered as they worked to build trust, address individual family needs, and foster collaboration across diverse home and school settings.

Once I had a list of similar codes, I sorted them into patterns. Then I used pattern coding to find categories in the data from generated codes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Bingham, 2023). From these categories, thematic analysis was applied to identify

emerging themes that revealed patterns and relationships within the data in relation to research questions (Bingham, 2023). Three themes emerged from the analysis; each capturing key patterns and insights reflected in the participants' responses to the research questions. Themes are phrases that summarize the categories emerging from the codes (Saldaña, 2021). The identified themes offered a clear understanding of the participants' perspectives and enabling an understanding of how their experiences related to the study's purpose. Thematic structure provided the connections within the participants' reflections. I arranged the findings into three themes to address the two research questions. The thematic structure effectively organized the data, offering a clear and meaningful presentation of participants lived experiences and challenges. By categorizing findings into themes, I highlighted the patterns observed across interviews and showed how participants' collective voices addressed the two research questions. This method also created an interconnected narrative, linking individual insights to the study's broader outcome. Three themes emerged from the data to address the research questions: (1) ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication with families; (2) ECPTIs adopted an advocacy role during their internship; and (3) ECPTIs desired to improve community engagement. The themes collectively offer a thorough answer to both research questions. They describe the experiences of ECPTIs in early learning settings in Alberta and explain what ECPTIs felt they needed to engage families more effectively. The findings are organized by the two research questions and subsequent themes that respond to each research question.

Themes Aligned to Research Questions 1

RQ1: Experiences. In building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta, ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges. They described supportive interactions with mentors that improved their confidence in communication, and building positive relational moments with families. They also identified ongoing challenges in communication including language barriers, inconsistent policies, limited time with families, and resource constraints that restricted their ability to engage consistently.

Theme 1: ECPTIs Experienced Both Successes and Challenges in Communication.

Participants consistently described communication as the cornerstone of building effective partnerships with families. They noted both meaningful successes and persistent challenges. Participants mentioned language barriers, and varied communication expectations as major challenges to connect with families. Nevertheless, they also shared examples where clear, prompt, and respectful communication fostered stronger relationships, enhanced trust, and led to greater family involvement. Participants reported that open communication with mentors and colleagues strengthened their confidence and enhanced their ability to connect with families. For example, 4BFSE9 and 6AFS10 emphasized that mentor feedback helped them navigate family interactions more effectively. They mentioned that receiving consistent support and feedback from mentors has been invaluable. The mentors' guidance has equipped them to approach families with confidence, particularly in unfamiliar circumstances. This ongoing mentorship had also enhanced the participants' capacity for self-reflection and improved approach to

building relationships with children and their families. Also, participant 2DFS3 pointed that “When everyone is on the same page, things just flow. I feel more confident when the expectations are clear, and we openly discuss children’s needs.” Numerous participants highlighted fruitful interactions that promoted connections with colleagues and families which improved their capacity to support children. These achievements were typically linked to mutual comprehension, and chances for open discussion within their professional settings. Many participants expressed determination to improve their communication skills and highlighted how mentorship, translation tools, and daily practice helped build confidence over time.

Despite these successes, ECPTIs described significant barriers, particularly language and cultural differences. Participants also reported that language differences sometimes led to miscommunication or mistranslations with families, making it harder for them to address children’s needs collaboratively. 5BMS11 and 4BFE9 noted how misunderstandings emerged when parents and educators lacked shared vocabulary, further complicating communication. Another factor being that some of the participants were international students, new immigrants to Canada, and English was not their first language. This added an additional layer of complexity to their interactions with families, as they were not only learning the expectations of early learning programs but also adjusting to the new linguistic and cultural environment. For these participants communicating with families sometimes involved navigating unfamiliar vocabulary, accents or cultural norms, which led to misunderstandings and uncertainty when initiating conversation.

Institutional challenges also get in the way of clear communication. Participants expressed hesitation when programs changed policies without timely communication. 6BFSE12 shared that policies changed and were not communicated to them right away. This affected participants' work because they were following procedures they didn't know had changed. Participants communicated that these inconsistencies made it difficult for them to communicate confidently and provide consistent messages to families.

Collectively, Theme 1 shows that participants often experienced positive relationship-building interactions with families and gained confidence through mentor support and everyday interactions. They faced ongoing barriers related to language, cultural differences, and institutional communication gaps. ECPTIs had to navigate uncertainty when expectations were unclear, or messages were misinterpreted as participant (3BMS5) mentioned that English was not his native tongue. Participants perceived that communication is both fundamental and delicate in early learning environments. Their perceptions showed that developing solid family teacher relationships called for both interpersonal skills and structural support that encourage accessibility, clarity and consistency.

Theme 2: ECPTIs Accepted an Advocacy Role During Their Internships.

Participants described family engagement as deeply connected with their advocacy roles for the children they taught and for themselves as emerging early childhood education professionals. Participants reported they advocated in the following ways: asking for and identifying clear and consistent safety procedures, requesting adequate learning materials and resources, advocating for equitable conditions across

programs, and advocating for family access to community resources to support children's needs, especially children with special learning needs.

One important dimension of advocacy was ensuring program safety. Participants explained that physical and relational safety shaped the trust families placed in educators. 1BFS1 reflected that they felt as if they had to be more alert because of the environment, they always locked the doors and that was one challenge of safety issues. Participants highlighted that families felt a sense of security when the children are safe and that their programs provide a safe environment. They also highlighted that program safety involving secure environments, and well-defined procedures were important not only for the welfare of children but also for fostering communication with families. On the other hand, if safety mechanisms are deficient or unclear, participants experienced a sense of vulnerability, which diminishes their capacity to advocate for children or interact assertively with families. These structural factors had a direct impact on their ability to advocate for the needs of the children and to execute their responsibilities with confidence.

A second aspect of advocacy involves access to adequate resources and equitable conditions across programs. Participants mentioned that there were differences between programs, especially between for-profit and non-profit programs. 1BFS1 explained that they did not have enough material to do activities or provocation. It depended on how much money the program had to be able to provide adequate materials. She also added that non-profit programs had more materials, and they were better welcoming students and families. Limited resources often restricted participants' ability to engage families with documentation, provocations, and high-quality learning materials. Participants also

described navigating cultural expectations around family roles. Participants added that some parents felt that in their culture it was the teachers' responsibility when their children were in school. This required participants to advocate sensitively for shared responsibility, using translation tools or mentor guidance to help families understand the value of partnership. Where organizational support was available, participants saw significantly better results. As one participant described, her program had a family support worker who helped new families access community services and to understand the importance of partnerships with teachers. This strengthened relationships as well as reducing barriers. Overall, Theme 2 revealed that participants viewed advocacy related to safety, resources, cultural responsiveness, and family access as essential for building strong relationships. However, they also emphasized that such advocacy required institutional backing, mentor guidance, and equitable resources to be effective. Table 4 shows the abbreviated themes and excerpts for RQ1.

Table 4

Abbreviated Themes and Excerpts for RQ1

Themes	Excerpts
Communication	<p>4BFE9 “It’s been great to have the support and the feedback from my mentor.” “When I first started, I was terrified of talking with families... now I’m at the point where we build relationships.”</p> <p>5BMS11 “Building relationships really helped me with my successes with working with families and children.” “Mentors modeled communication with parents before allowing me to try.”</p> <p>4BFE9). “When I first started, I was terrified of talking with families... now I’m at the point where we build relationships.”</p> <p>(5BMS11) “Definitely, there were language barriers at first.”</p> <p>1BFS1 “An example challenge came when he said, how we don’t know how to do our jobs, where we are when a child was cutting himself with a pair of scissors?”</p> <p>3BMS5 “The challenges that I mentioned are language barriers. As an international student and an immigrant to Canada, English obviously is not my first language.”</p> <p>(3BMS5) “They can also help me to navigate challenges, make informed decisions, and build my confidence.”</p>
Advocacy	<p>4BFE9 “We offer parents to come into the program for the needs of their children.”</p> <p>2BFE4 “It provides them a sense of security that their child is safe.” “a safe environment. In early learning, childcare is very important.”</p> <p>3BMS5) “It always reminds me how carefully we should consider the language that we use. To convey respect, not being disrespectful, inclusion, or being judgmental or accepting.”</p> <p>(4BFE9) “It’s very structured and rigid around nap time and feeding times... I think if we were more flexible... it would help.”</p> <p>(4BFE9) “Instead of looking at what the deficits are... It’s important to look at what children can achieve.”</p> <p>(4BFE9) “I wish we had more professional development days.”</p> <p>(5BMS11) “It’s good to have a family support worker.”</p> <p>(1BFS1) “I felt as if we had to be more alert because of the environment, the people who sit near the streets.”</p> <p>(1BFS1) “We are always closed on the east side. I could feel as if it puts each one of us to the test, because of locking the doors, that is one challenge.”</p>

Theme Aligned to Research Questions 2

RQ2: Needs. To build relationships with students’ families in preschool programs in Alberta, participants expressed their need for stronger community engagement. Participants expressed that they felt stronger community engagement could lead to more practicum time, mentor guidance, access to translation resources, involvement with

community support workers, support for clearer safety procedures, and provision of adequate instructional materials. They emphasized the importance of welcoming policies that promote open communication and normalize frequent family presence. These needs reflected their understanding that authentic family engagement required structured support and consistent preparation.

Theme 3: ECPTIs Desired to Improve Community Engagement.

Participants expressed a strong desire to deepen their engagement with families and the broader community in the following ways: more welcoming inclusive environments, more frequent and meaningful and open communication, increasing opportunities for family involvement, and overcoming language barriers to improve connection. They described wanting to work in environments where families felt welcomed and where communication was open and respectful. Participants valued programs with open-door policies, shared communication boards, and routines that invited families to visit or participate. One participant explained that programs welcome families, adding that she wanted to work in an environment where they respect her, linking educator and family respect as interconnected elements of community culture. Another participant emphasized that families were welcome to visit the program at any time, and this showed appreciation for programs that normalize family presence. Communication emerged again as a foundational factor supporting community engagement. Participants shared how positive daily interactions, messages about children's accomplishments, and open, friendly conversations helped build trusting relationships. They explained that their mentors played an important role in helping them

build respectful and trusting relationships with families, reinforcing that open communication and safe environments are very important.

Participants also wanted to strengthen their ability to overcome language and cultural barriers. They frequently relied on translation apps, simple language, body gestures, and community support workers to communicate effectively with families who speak additional languages. These tools helped them ensure families understood daily routines, developmental updates, and program expectations. Participants also mentioned that mentorship played a significant role in participants' desire to improve community engagement. They sought more guidance for handling sensitive conversations, more modeling from mentors, and more time interacting with families. 2BFE4 and 3BMS5 explained that they required more guidance and resources for navigating different family situations. In addition, 6BFSE12 and 4BFE9 emphasized that more practicum days would give them more opportunities to build relationships with families and practice their skills consistently. This desire reflected participants' growing awareness that strong family relationships required time, presence, and ongoing support.

Overall, Theme 3 demonstrated that participants wanted to strengthen their capacity for community engagement by working in welcoming environments, receiving mentor modeling, improving communication strategies, and gaining more practicum experience. Their desire aligned with their developing professional identity and their commitment to building partnerships that support children's wellbeing. Table 5 shows the abbreviated theme and excerpts for RQ2.

Table 5*Abbreviated Themes and Excerpts for RQ2*

Theme	Excerpts
Community engagement	<p>5BMS11 “I will be providing the time, space, and materials to the children according to their needs so they can thrive in that environment.” “A prepared environment should include some open space where children can move freely. This can support their motor development.” “I hope that my supervisor or my mentor can give me some more resources, for example, when these children bite other children. The positive way to correct their behavior”</p> <p>1BFS1 “I don't have enough material to do those activities or provocations.”</p> <p>4BFE9 “For example, if you have a child who is on the autism spectrum, you may look at what they're capable of doing, and it may not look the same as the next child beside them.”</p> <p>5BMS11 “They are ensuring that our supervisor provides us with the necessary resources and support throughout our placement.” “What I need is more guidance when dealing with families.”</p> <p>5BMS11 “So, I would require more guidance on how to deal with different types of situations, what I should do in these situations.”</p> <p>4BFE9 “Once I started working there more often, having more practicum days, I found it easier. “Instead of going two times, maybe we can have something like, you know, straight for a month. So just having more consistency.”</p>

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility in this study was attained through extensive involvement with participants, which facilitated a profound comprehension of their experiences in building relationships with students' families. Member checking helps decrease bias, improve credibility, and allow participants to review their responses (Erdman et al., 2023). Avoiding subjective language, making judgments about values, and being explicit assisted in reducing prejudice. Member checking was employed to ensure the accurate representation of participants' perspectives. Member checking has been recognized as a valuable strategy in qualitative research that utilizes interviews (Ho & Limpaecher, 2023). Interviews were conducted, and data were evaluated until saturation was achieved,

thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness is assessed based on credibility, transferability, and dependability (Ahmed, 2024). The researcher must adhere to the interview methodology, protect participant safety, and accurately observe and evaluate the study's findings. Qualitative research must ensure trustworthiness by addressing dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability (Stahl et al., 2020). The data collection method was carefully specified, and the interview questions were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework. The method for gathering data in this research was precisely defined to maintain methodological integrity, as qualitative investigations require a consistent connection among the selected design, theoretical framework, and the methods used to collect data. Creating this alignment increased the study's rigor by showing that all elements, purpose of the research, research questions, and methods are conceptually linked. To follow this need, the questions for the interviews were purposefully crafted and improved to directly correspond with the research questions and the foundational conceptual framework of the study.

Data discrepancies were used to enhance validity by presenting diverse views and ensuring that all data were examined consistently (Coleman, 2021). Transferability is the degree to which the study's findings can be applied or adapted to multiple situations, locations, or populations (Ahmed, 2024). Unlike statistical generalization in quantitative research, transferability in qualitative inquiry relies on providing comprehensive, detailed accounts that allow others to assess the applicability of the results within specific contexts. In this study, transferability was supported through the use of rich descriptions,

which offered in-depth portrayals of the research setting, participants, and their experiences. The selection of participants aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives among pre-service teacher interns from diverse early childhood education environments. By clearly defining the study's context and linking findings to existing literature, the research enables readers to evaluate the relevance of its study's conclusions across varied educational settings.

These strategies enhanced the significance and applicability of the findings in informing teacher training programs and practices. Each step of the research process was carefully documented, including the rationale behind methodological choices, to allow other researchers to follow or adapt the study for their own purposes. The findings were presented in a meaningful way, with detailed descriptions of the participants, procedures, and underlying assumptions (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Summary

Participants, when reflecting on their teaching practice, established significant connections between their courses and their practicum experiences. This reflective engagement was an important phase in their professional development, transforming theory from a theoretical idea into an effective tool for enhancing their relationships with children and families. Participants enhanced their confidence in teaching and cultivated autonomy in making instructional and relational decisions through exploration, feedback, and reflection. This process demonstrated self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which highlighted the significance of satisfying the psychological requirements of competence and autonomy for self-motivation and personal development. As participants

developed confidence in their ability to address barriers and cultivate trusted relationships, their feelings of competence increased. Similarly, being able to make decisions about the learning environment based on reflection promoted confidence, strengthening their determination to participate and think thoughtfully in their professional responsibilities.

Moreover, while participants acknowledged the influence of their relationships with mentors, children, and families on their developing teaching perspectives, their experiences reflected the interconnections outlined in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Their learning developed through collaborative interactions within the environmental systems. The microsystem, comprising the relationships they had with children, mentor teachers, and families, offered meaningful experiences that shaped their understanding of best practice. The mesosystem, which includes the interactions among these relationships, such as communication between mentors and families, further impacted their professional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additional factors, including institutional expectations and cultural perceptions of teaching, reflected the exosystem and macrosystem that shaped their growth and engagement in the community. Their thoughts demonstrated how these interconnected networks together influenced their feeling of belonging to a community and developing their identity as an educator and professional competence.

Participants' growth patterns indicated the significant connection between personal motivation, as defined by self-determination theory, and environmental factors, as outlined in ecological systems theory, within early childhood teacher preparation.

Their growing confidence and autonomy resulted not just from intrinsic motivation but also from supportive connections and surroundings that fostered their potential. This discovery highlights the significance of reflective practice, mentorship, and honest relationships with families as essential factors for promoting the comprehensive professional development of pre-service teachers. However, they also reported that they require more support and resources to be more successful in their practicums. Chapter 5 will present the discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families. This chapter discusses the significant results of the research on ECPTIs' relationships with children and families, focusing on the themes that arose during data collection. Two research questions (RQ) were selected to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families, and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. These questions were appropriate to guide this basic qualitative study to address the problem that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta.

RQ1: What are ECPTIs' experiences in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

RQ2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

The three themes emerged from the data to address the research questions: (1) ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication with families; (2) ECPTIs adopted an advocacy role during their internship; and (3) ECPTIs desired to improve community engagement. The first theme, ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication emerged as participants consistently described communication as the cornerstone of building effective partnerships with families. Participants noted both meaningful successes and persistent challenges. Participants

mentioned language barriers, and varied communication expectations as major challenges to their connection with families. Nevertheless, participants also shared examples where clear, prompt, and respectful communication fostered stronger relationships, enhanced trust, and led to greater family involvement. Participants reported that open communication with mentors and colleagues strengthened their confidence and enhanced their ability to connect with families. They mentioned that receiving consistent support and feedback from mentors has been invaluable. The mentors' guidance has equipped them to approach families with confidence, particularly in unfamiliar circumstances. Despite these successes, ECPTIs described significant barriers, particularly language and cultural differences. Participants also reported that language differences sometimes led to miscommunication or mistranslations with families, making it harder for them to address children's needs collaboratively.

The second theme that emerged from the data revealed participants' belief that advocacy was a key responsibility for ECPTIs during their internship. Participants described family engagement as deeply connected with advocacy both for children and for themselves as emerging professionals. ECPTIs advocated for children and themselves in the following ways: clear and consistent safety procedures, adequate learning materials and resources, equitable conditions across programs, and family access to community resources. One important dimension of advocacy was ensuring program safety. Participants explained that physical and relational safety shaped the trust families placed in educators. 1BFS1 reflected that they felt as if they had to be more alert because of the environment, they always locked the doors and that was one challenge of safety issues.

Participants highlighted that families felt a sense of security when the children are safe and that their programs provide a safe environment. They also highlighted that program safety involving secure environments, and well-defined procedures were important not only for the welfare of children but also for fostering communication with families. On the other hand, if safety mechanisms are deficient or unclear, participants experienced a sense of vulnerability, which diminishes their capacity to advocate for children or interact assertively with families. These structural factors had a direct impact on their ability to advocate for the needs of the children and to execute their responsibilities with confidence.

The final theme that emerged was ECPTIs desired to improve community engagement. Participants expressed a strong desire to deepen their engagement with families and the broader community in the following ways: more welcoming inclusive environments, more frequent and meaningful and open communication, increasing opportunities for family involvement, and overcoming language barriers to improve connection. They described wanting to work in environments where families felt welcomed and where communication was open and respectful. Participants valued programs with open-door policies, shared communication boards, and routines that invited families to visit or participate. One participant explained that programs welcome families, adding that she wanted to work in an environment where they respect her, linking educator and family respect as interconnected elements of community culture. Participants also mentioned that mentorship played a significant role in participants' desire to improve community engagement. They sought more guidance for handling

sensitive conversations, more modeling from mentors, and more time interacting with families.

This chapter links these results to the current literature and examines them using the frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (2000). In the discussion, I will show the relationship between the findings of my study and the current literature. The ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and self-determination theories (Deci & Ryan, 2000), will be used to present the analysis. These theories explain how personal, environmental, and psychological factors influence the experiences and professional development of ECPTIs.

Interpretation of the Findings

Two research questions (RQ) were selected to explore the experiences of ECPTIs in building relationships with students' families, and the resources needed to build relationships with students' families in Alberta. These questions were appropriate to guide this basic qualitative study to address the problem that many ECPTIs experience challenges in building relationships with students' families during the internship phase of ECE teacher preparation in Alberta.

RQ 1: What are ECPTIs experiences (challenges and successes) in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

RQ 2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build relationships with students' families in preschool programs in Alberta?

Twelve interviews were conducted on ECPTIs' relationships with children and families. The interview questions were purposefully intended to be open-ended, enabling participants to explain their experiences, thoughts, and emotions in their own terms (Appendix B). This promoted genuine and significant communication, allowing participants to express their full perspectives on their practicum experiences, specially building relationships with children and families. The interview sought detailed, descriptive responses that exceeded basic information, providing extensive information about the complexities of ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication, advocacy emerged as a key responsibility for ECPTIs, and teacher candidates desired to improve community engagements within the practicum setting. Professional development programs play a critical role in enhancing ECPTIs' relationship-building skills by providing training focused on interpersonal competencies (Barron et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2023). This strategy facilitated a more participant-centered discussion, consistent with the qualitative nature of the study, and ensured that the interns' perspectives and lived experiences were emphasized in the findings.

The findings from both research questions indicated that ECPTIs experienced both successes and challenges in communication, participants described communication as the cornerstone of building effective partnerships with families. They noted both meaningful successes and persistent challenges. Participants mentioned language barriers, and varied communication expectations as major challenges to connect with families. Nevertheless, they also shared examples where clear, prompt, and respectful communication fostered stronger relationships, enhanced trust, and led to greater family

involvement. Participants reported that open communication with mentors and colleagues strengthened their confidence and enhanced their ability to connect with families. Despite these successes, ECPTIs described significant barriers, particularly language and cultural differences.

Advocacy as a key responsibility was adopted, if not embraced, by ECPTIs, as they strived to establish relationships with families involved in preschool programs during their internships. According to Özcan et al., (2023), participants described family engagement as deeply connected with advocacy both for children and for themselves as emerging professionals in the following ways: clear and consistent safety procedures, adequate learning materials and resources, as well as equitable conditions across programs, and family access to community resources. Participants highlighted that families felt a sense of security when the children are safe and that their programs provide a safe environment. They also highlighted that program safety involving secure environments, and well-defined procedures were important not only for the welfare of children but also for fostering communication with families. On the other hand, if safety mechanisms are deficient or unclear, participants experienced a sense of vulnerability, which diminishes their capacity to advocate for children or interact assertively with families. These structural factors had a direct impact on their ability to advocate for the needs of the children and to execute their responsibilities with confidence. Strong teacher-student bond provides a safe, supportive environment where students feel valued and encouraged to succeed (Norheim & Moser, 2020).

ECPTIs desired to improve community engagement. Participants expressed a strong desire to deepen their engagement with families and the broader community in the following ways: more welcoming inclusive environments, more frequent and meaningful and open communication, increasing opportunities for family involvement, and overcoming language barriers to improve connection. They described wanting to work in environments where families felt welcomed and where communication was open and respectful. Participants valued programs with open-door policies, shared communication boards, and routines that invited families to visit or participate. One participant explained that programs welcome families, adding that she wanted to work in an environment where they respect her, linking educator and family respect as interconnected elements of community culture. Together, these findings demonstrate that although ECPTIs are dedicated to building strong, respectful relationships with families, they need ongoing mentorship, readily available resources, and support at the system level to achieve their goals effectively. The findings are consistent with and build upon earlier studies that highlight the significance of relationships in early childhood education. Researchers have repeatedly observed that positive and mutually beneficial relationships between teachers and families improve children's social emotional growth and contribute positively to their educational achievements (Anthony-Newman, 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). These findings add to the increasing evidence that initial practicum experiences, when supported by mentorship and reflective support, are important for building interpersonal competence among ECPTIs.

Recommendations

Future research could expand this research by examining various perspectives of ECPTIs across different practicum environments. A qualitative study completed over multiple sites and extending over a longer period could uncover how contextual differences shape relationship development as time progresses. Additionally, including viewpoints from mentors and family members would provide a comprehensive insight into understanding relationships that influence the growth of ECPTIs. Programs should also provide role definition and professional limits. Programs should offer documented instructions along with sample dialogues for delicate discussions with parents (such as behavior or development), in addition to monitored training for ECPTIs. 5BMS11 mentioned that “I hope that my supervisor or my mentor can give me some more resources, for example, when these children bite other children. The positive way to correct their behavior.” ECPTIs have reported needing more support and resources to overcome their challenges and barriers to building relationships, particularly in diverse and complex early childhood environments (Özcan et al., 2023).

Implications for Positive Social Change

The findings demonstrate an active interconnection between self-determination theory (the way early childhood practitioners perceive autonomy, competence, and connections) and the ecological framework (how various systems facilitate or limit their practices). The combined perspectives provide a strong approach to understand and support relationship development in early childhood settings. Supporting the collaboration between families and schools during early childhood plays a crucial role in

ensuring children's emotional wellbeing, active participation, and developmental success, while recognizing and validating the cultural identities and perspectives of families. By providing access to mentorship and resources, educational programs can help lessen inequalities and promote education that is inclusive and rooted in the community (Özcan et al., 2023). Future research could expand this research by examining various perspectives of ECPTIs across different practicum environments. A qualitative study completed over multiple sites and extending over a longer period could uncover how contextual differences shape relationship development as time progresses. Additionally, including viewpoints from mentors and family members would provide a comprehensive insight into understanding relationships that influence the growth of ECPTIs.

Conclusion

The study offers an understanding of how ECPTIs develop relationships with children and their families during their practicum training. Grounded in ecological systems theory and self-determination theory, ECPTIs benefitted from effective mentorship, thoughtful reflection, and culturally responsive interactions, which were vital for enhancing professional skills. Findings indicated that ECPTIs navigate challenging environments filled with communication obstacles and limited resources. ECPTIs engage in advocacy efforts as they strive to establish relationships with students' families. Through structured practice, ongoing engagement, and available resources, ECPTIs transition from doubt to confidence. Competency in communication, promoting adaptable and inclusive settings, along with access to mentorship and educational materials, are

essential requirements for delivering equitable and high-quality education in early childhood. The experiences of participants emphasized that establishing relationships is not merely on skill but rather an evolving process influenced by factors such as the environment, motivation, and self-reflection. It is important to equip future educators with the ability to create significant, respectful, and culturally responsive relationships with families, which in the end supports in the holistic development of young children. Participants identified numerous challenges, including language barriers and cultural differences, which they indicated often restricted communication as well as relationship building with families. Findings indicated that ECPTIs advocated for support systems, which would enable them to promote and build relationships with families. Findings indicated that ECPTIs navigated challenging environments filled with communication obstacles and limited resources. ECPTIs engaged in advocacy efforts as they strive to establish relationships with children's families. This study contributes to positive social change by providing evidence-based insights to inform teacher preparation programs about ECPTIs' experiences and needs in building relationships with students' families in Alberta. Its significance lies in strengthening the alignment between teacher education practices and the relational competencies essential in early childhood settings, thereby supporting more responsive, equitable and family centered learning experiences.

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Appendix A: Alignment of Conceptual Framework with Questions

RQ 1: What are ECPTIs' experiences (challenges, barriers, accomplishments) in building relationships with students' families in preschool programs?

Self-determination Theory	Ecological Theory	Interview Questions
Psychological Needs	Home	IQ1: What is your philosophy of early childhood education?
Professional Identity	School Community	Prompt: I heard you say... please tell me more about that.
Developmental Needs	Province	IQ2: Please describe your experiences as a pre-service teacher intern.
Environnent	School	Prompt: I would like to hear an example.
Environnent	School	IQ3: Please describe your program climate or environment and your understanding of the prepared environment.
Environnent	School	Prompt: I heard you say... please tell me more about that.
Developmental Needs	Home Community	IQ4: How did you learn about your program's policies?
Developmental Needs	Home Community	Prompt: I would like to hear examples of the policies
Diverse cultural context	Province	IQ5: As an intern, how does your mentor teacher encourage or support you in communication with families, in order to build a relationship based on respect and trust?
		Prompt: I hear you say ... please give me some examples?

RQ 2: What do ECPTIs report they need to build effective relationships with students' families in preschool programs?

Self-determination Theory	Ecological Theory	Interview Questions
Diverse cultural context	Home	IQ6: From your understanding, what role do families play in supporting children's relationships with their teachers?
Diverse social family context	School	Prompt: I would like to hear more, please give me an example.
Complex relationship dynamics	Community	IQ7: Describe some of the challenges you've encountered while working with families
Multifaceted relationship dynamics	Province	Prompt: I would like to hear how you navigated those challenges.
Psychological Needs	School	IQ8: What forms of communication do you send to students' families?
Professional Identity	Community	Prompt: I would like to hear more and please give me some examples
Developmental Needs	School	IQ9: In what ways has feedback or resources from your mentor or supervisor helped you improve your skills in building relationships with students and their families?
	Community	Prompt: Please give me an example of the feedback you got.
Professional Identity	School	IQ10: How have you grown professionally as a pre-service teacher intern in building relationships with students and families?
	Community	

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Hello -----. My name is Fungayi Madzonga, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I would like to thank you for volunteering to participate in my study on ECPTIs' Relationships with Students' families. I look forward to hearing about your experiences. Our interview today should be between 45 and 60 minutes, and I will watch the time to make sure we do not go over. As a reminder, your identity and everything you say will be kept confidential. Please also feel free to stop this interview at any time and skip questions if you wish to. As mentioned previously, I am a Doctoral student at Walden University, and my major is in Early Childhood Education. Your participation in my research study will support my dissertation. Once again, thank you.

Before we begin, I would like to remind you that you have given your consent to participate in this interview and agree to have it audio recorded.
Are you ready? I will begin the audio recording.

Interview Questions

IQ1: What is your philosophy of early childhood education?

Prompt: I heard you say... please tell me more about that.

IQ2: Please describe your experiences developing relationships with students and their families as a pre-service teacher intern.

Prompt: I would like to hear an example.

IQ3: Please describe your program climate or environment and your understanding of the prepared environment.

Prompt: I heard you say... please tell me more about that.

IQ4: Please give examples of the early childhood program policies regarding family involvement or engagement, and explain how you learned about your program's policies?

Prompt: I would like to hear examples of the policies.

IQ5: As an intern, how does your mentor teacher encourage or support you in communication with families, in order to build a relationship based on respect and trust?

Prompt: I hear you say ... Please give me some examples.

IQ6: From your understanding, what role do families play in supporting children's relationships with their teachers?

Prompt: I would like to hear more...please give an example?

IQ7: Please describe challenges and successes you have experiences while working with children and families?

Prompt: I heard you say...please elaborate.

IQ8: How do you handle sensitive topics or difficult conversations with families?

Prompt: I would like to hear about a conversation you had with a family member.

IQ9: In what ways has feedback or resources from your mentor or supervisor helped you improve your skills in building relationships with students and their families?

Prompt: Please give me an example of the feedback you received.

IQ10: How have you grown professionally as a pre-service teacher intern in building relationships with students and families?

Prompt: I hear you say... please give more explanation on that.

IQ11: What do you feel you need from a mentor or supervisor, to strengthen these relationships?

Prompt: Please give me an example of an area that you need help.

IQ12: Is there anything else you'd like to share?