Preschool teachers' perspectives of empathy and parent-teacher partnership in early childhood education

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Preschool teachers’ perspectives of empathy and parent–teacher partnership in early childhood education

by

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A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people have helped and supported me as I have made my way through this dissertation and Ph.D. process. “Thank you” does not begin to address my appreciation to and for my major professor, Mary Jane Brotherson, who nurtured me along this journey. You are an incredible mentor; I have learned more from you than you know. To the rest of my committee members, Dianne Draper, Kere Hughes-Belding, Gayle Luze, and Susan Maude, thank you for your collective wisdom, understanding, support, and collegial spirit throughout my time at ISU.

To the other FSD principal investigators, Elizabeth Erwin, Susan Palmer, and Jean Ann Summers, thank you for letting me take part in this project and allowing me the freedom to explore the data in new direction. To my fellow FSD graduate students, I have learned so much from you.

To the wonderful teachers who participated in this research, you have taught me so much. I appreciate your willingness to open up and share your ideas with me. Without you, this project would not exist.

To Aryn Kruse and Mandi Hardy Hillman, you have made this wild ride so much fun. Tears, laughter, chocolate, and babies . . . I think that sums it up. You are amazing friends and sounding boards. I’m looking forward to our future collaborations. To Mindy Heinz and Laura Severson, our monthly dinner dates have kept me sane and always gave me something to look forward to. Thanks for being such great listeners and great friends.

To my fellow ECSE Leadership cohort: William R. Henninger, IV, Aryn Kruse, Lisa Naig, Gloria Frolek-Clark, and Cindy Weigel thanks for your friendship and encouragement
to keep going. To my other friends crazy enough to do this, especially Aisha White and Meneka Johnson, you’re almost there!

To my parents, Tom and Norma Farstad, ever-supportive, ever-willing to get in the car and drive days and days across the country in order to help us when we needed it, I love you. Amy, Julie, and Bri, thanks for just “getting it” and being awesome. Emmy, you just always know. Kevin, I think of you and miss you every single day. Peter and Paul, thanks for being such generous uncles and hosts during our much loved weekend escapes. You are amazing. To my friends and family back home (and all over), who have been so understanding and supportive of my absence these past few years, thank you!

Thank you, Kris Miller, for taking such great care of Sophie while I was working. I cannot tell you how much of a relief it was to know that she was happy. I never worried when she was with you.

Jason, without a second thought, without knowing where we were going, and without looking back, you jumped on board when I announced, “I think I want to get my Ph.D.” You have supported me (sometimes carried) through this crazy adventure. We have pushed and pulled each other toward this end. You made me believe in myself on days when I wasn’t quite sure about this whole thing. I, quite literally, would not have been able to do this without you. I don’t know how, but you have taken care of us, maintained perspective, finished your own dissertation, worked multiple jobs, and you’ve done it all with a great sense of humor. You are amazing. You took way more than your share of “sane” days, so you have a couple hundred “free crazy” days coming to you. I love you.
Sophie, my love, you have given me perspective and have taught me more (and more about empathy) than I ever expected. I learn so much from you every day. This is all for you. I love you more than you will ever know.
ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on understanding empathy and its role in partnerships between teachers, children, and their families within the context of early childhood education. Empathy is critical in relationships and has been tied to positive outcomes in social services, but society as a whole has been characterized as facing an “empathy deficit.” Diversity has increased dramatically in the United States within the past 30 years. As diversity increases, the need for teachers to be able to empathize with children and families who are different from themselves also increases. Empathy in early childhood education partnerships is valued, however the role of empathy in parent–teacher partnerships in early childhood is not well understood. Eighteen inclusive preschool teachers participated in initial interviews; five of whom participated in follow-up interviews. This ethnographic study focused on understanding teachers’ values, beliefs, and language in relation to empathy and parent–teacher partnerships. Overall, the study found that many teachers expressed empathy toward children, families, and families’ cultural practices, though some did not. Teachers whose statements were solely empathic described their relationships with families in a positive way; whereas teachers whose statements reflected critical views often described dissatisfaction in their relationships with families. Three major themes and nine subthemes emerged from the data. The three major themes are: (a) criticism distorts empathy, (b) expressing sincere empathy, and (c) nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature. The interpretations of these themes provide an understanding of the complexities of empathy in parent and teacher partnerships. Implications for the development of empathy in preservice and in-service professional development and suggestions for future research are discussed.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eye for an instant?

Henry David Thoreau

Rationale

Empathy has been called an essential component to the human condition (Nass, as cited by Richtel, 2010; Hojat, 2007). The ability to empathize is critical in human relationships. It helps one feel connected with others, understand others’ feelings and behavior, make predictions about future behavior, and then react in appropriate ways (Allison, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Stone, & Muncer, 2011; Wheelwright & Baron-Cohen, 2011). Empathy also helps one understand people whose values, views, and behavior are different from one’s own (Calloway-Thomas, 2010).

Diversity, in its many forms, including socioeconomic, cultural, and ability, adds great richness and vibrancy to our society’s culture and schools. As diversity increases and a changing socioeconomic landscape takes shape (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), the need for teachers to be able to empathize with children and families who are different from them also increases. Researchers in fields outside of early childhood education (ECE) have recognized this need to understand and increase the empathic ability of its practitioners. The fields of health and social work offer examples that demonstrate a focus on studying empathy in relation to its practitioners. Larson and Yao (2005) argued for the necessity of empathy in the physician–patient relationship, asserting that empathic physicians are more effective healers, and Williams and Stickley (2010) indicated that patients desire empathic nurses but often perceive empathy to be lacking within the nurse–patient relationship. Regarding social
work, Gerdes and Segal (2011) emphasized that empathy helps practitioners become more effective and also aids in avoiding compassion fatigue.

In the field of education, recent research on empathy has been focused mostly on the empathic ability of teachers in elementary or middle school. For example, Cooper (2004) explored empathic teachers as moral models for students in an elementary school in the United Kingdom; and in the United States, McAllister and Irvine (2002) studied teachers’ beliefs regarding empathy and its perceived effectiveness with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. In the field of ECE, however, the empathic ability of teachers, specifically in relation to parent–teacher partnership, has been limited in recent research literature.

Partnerships are recognized as a cornerstone of working with a diverse range of families (Brotherson et al., 2010). Although partnerships are recognized as being important, they, unfortunately, can sometimes be unsuccessful—specifically between parents of young children with disabilities and their teachers (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Research in ECE examines qualities needed in partnerships such as trust, reciprocity, and communication (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Winton, Brotherson, & Summers, 2008), but empathy has not been a major focus of investigation or discussion. Empathy has been discussed in partnerships as an example of behavior associated with good help-giving practices with families, specifically, relational practices with a focus on empathy used to help strengthen family-centered practices (Dunst & Trivette, 2010; Trivette & Dunst, 2007). Overall, discussions of empathy in the parent–teacher partnership have been largely glossed over and the role of empathy in parent–teacher partnerships has not been well examined.
Society has been characterized as facing an “empathy deficit” (“Obama,” 2006). There is evidence to support a decline in empathy among college students (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011) and that bullying among high school students is associated with low empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011). These examples highlight the need for further study of empathy in the field of education and a greater understanding of empathy in teachers. If preservice teachers are among those in the college student cohorts whose empathy is declining, there are great implications for preservice and in-service trainings on empathy. It will become imperative to help preservice teachers (and later as they become in-service teachers) to be empathic with families of young children, including those whose children have disabilities or are from diverse cultures, to assist in building partnerships.

Partnership between parents and teachers in the context of ECE is the main relationship through which empathy in adults can be expressed and examined. In this ethnographic study, I explore empathy through inclusive preschool teachers’ perspectives. I also discuss the importance of empathy in the parent–teacher partnership.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of my research was to understand the role of empathy in the relationships teachers have with children and families in the context of ECE. The focus was on understanding how teachers perceived empathy and developed empathic understanding for children, families, and their cultural practices. I wanted to learn about the teachers’ perceptions of empathy and how they thought it did or did not affect their partnerships with families. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed:

1. In what ways do teachers express empathy in their relationships with young children and families?
2. What are preschool teachers’ perceptions of empathy in the parent–teacher partnership?

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The focus of this dissertation incorporates the topics of empathy and partnership in the context of ECE. In Chapter 2, I review relevant research literature on empathy, describe varying definitions of empathy, and provide a definition I created for the purposes of this research. I review the research literature on partnership and how it stems from a family-centered philosophy and practices and is part of relational and participatory helpgiving practices. I discuss how empathy could help to strengthen family-centered practices and partnerships.

In Chapter 3, I provide a brief background to the study including how the data were situated within a larger research study. I discuss the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective and ethnographic methodology that guided my work. Also included is how family systems theory and bioecological theory influenced data analysis. I provide information on participants and data collection for both the initial interviews and follow-up interviews. The process of data analysis, including methods of coding and the ways in which I organized the data as the themes began to emerge, is also discussed. I detail the validation of data analysis. I conclude Chapter 3 with ethical considerations and limitations to the research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the findings and discussion of the research. Overall, there are three themes with nine subthemes that emerged from the data. I detail the findings in response to the first research question, which were based primarily on initial interviews. The first theme is *criticism distorts empathy*, and it has two subthemes: *holding a deficit view* and
placing blame. The second theme explored is: expressing sincere empathy. It has four subthemes: embracing inclusion as a philosophy, being relaxed and balanced, being responsive to culture, and engaging in meaningful communication with families. Finally, I examine the third theme, nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature and the respective subthemes, experience fosters natural empathy, empathy lays a foundation for emotional security and safety, and awareness allows empathy to unfold. The third theme and subthemes were based primarily on the data collected from the follow-up interviews and emerged in response to the second research question.

I conclude with a discussion of the study in Chapter 5. I explore implications of the research for ECE in practice, personnel preparation, and professional development. Finally, I suggest ideas for future research and provide my concluding thoughts.

**Definitions of Terms**

For clarity I will talk about ECE in a general and inclusive sense and will refrain from referring to the subset of early childhood special education. The information and themes that are presented are applicable to both ECE and early childhood special education.

**Criticism:** “1) not approving–tending to find fault with somebody or something, or with people and things in general; 2) giving comments or judgments—containing or involving comments and opinions that analyze or judge something, especially in a detailed way.” The definition for judgmental included: “tending to judge or criticize the conduct of other people” (*Encarta Dictionary*, n.d.).

**Diversity:** any type of difference among people, including but not limited to, socioeconomic status, cultural background, language, ability, behavior, etc.
**Empathic cheerfulness:** when one shows positive emotion toward a person in distress (Light & Zahn-Waxler, 2012).

**Empathic happiness:** when one experiences pleasure or goodwill in response to another’s positive emotions (Light & Zahn-Waxler, 2012).

**Empathic inference:** “the everyday mind reading that people do whenever they attempt to infer other people’s thoughts and feelings” (Ickes, 2009, p. 57).

**Empathy:** in the context of early care and education, the ability to feel what the child or parent is feeling, understand what the child or parent is feeling, communicate that understanding to them, and then respond in a way to help meet their needs; I detail this definition further in Chapter 2.

**Inclusion:** “early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of family, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports” (Division for Early Childhood & the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 2).

**Parent/family:** a familial or nonfamilial guardian or caretaker of a child. I will reference “parent” and “family” interchangeably throughout to acknowledge and include different types of family arrangements.
*Partnership:* “relationships between families and professionals in which they mutually agree to defer to each other’s judgments and expertise” (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006, p. 110).

*Sympathy:* can described as “an emotional response, stemming from the apprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, that is not the same as the other’s state or condition but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other” (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009, pp. 71–72).

*Teacher:* a practitioner or paraprofessional who works in the preschool classroom directly with children.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.

Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1962)

The Importance of Empathy

The phenomenon of empathy is essential for interpersonal communication (Decety, 2011). Empathy aids parents in caring for their children and allows humans to live in groups (Decety, 2011). Empathy helps one to understand others’ behavior, anticipate what someone else might do, feel what others are feeling and then respond to them (Allison et al., 2011; Wheelwright & Baron-Cohen, 2011). Empathy is also important for moral reasoning and prosocial behavior (Decety, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). It allows one to understand and appreciate differences in people—particularly those whose behavior, thoughts, and beliefs are different than one’s own (Calloway-Thomas, 2010; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Calloway-Thomas (2010) affirmed the necessity for empathy in society and asserted,

Empathy is the moral glue that holds civil society together; unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble. Humans are united by the powers and possibilities of empathy. (p.7)

Philosophers, psychologists, and researchers from a wide variety of disciplines have studied and written about empathy throughout history (Decety & Lamm, 2006; Gerdes & Segal, 2011). Within the past 10 years, there has been a renewed interest in empathy, and vast amounts of research have been conducted (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). An exhaustive
review of the history of empathy is beyond the scope of this literature review (see Jahoda, 2005; Wispé, 1987), but the following examples highlight the diverse nature of this body of work in the fields of: medicine (e.g., Larson & Yao, 2005; Pedersen, 2009), nursing (e.g., Williams & Stickley, 2010), acupuncture (e.g., Price, Mercer, & MacPherson, 2005), oncology (e.g., Neumann et al., 2007), neuroscience (e.g., Decety, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2006), primatology (e.g., De Waal, 2009), child development (e.g., Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, & Emde, 1992; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990), social work (e.g., Raines, 1990), counseling psychology (e.g., Duan & Hill, 1996; Stebnicki, 2008), organizational psychology and management (e.g., Morris & Feldman, 1996; Scott, Colquitt, Paddock, & Judge, 2010), and exercise science (e.g., Lorimer & Jowett, 2010). In addition to empirical studies, websites have been constructed to pass on information for mass audiences (e.g., Rutsch’s, n.d., Center for Building a Culture of Empathy) and evidence-based curriculums for cultivating empathy among children have been developed (i.e., Roots of Empathy and Seeds of Empathy, see Gordon, 2009), all of which are devoted to studying, understanding, and/or increasing empathy in society.

**Benefits of Empathy: A Few Examples**

One reason empathy has been described as important is its connection to positive outcomes in healthcare, social work, psychology, and education. Research has shown benefits of empathic practitioners for clients or recipients of services. Practitioners also have benefitted from providing empathic care or services. The following examples in healthcare and social work further elaborate on this concept.

Empathy in healthcare has been tied to positive outcomes for patients and for physicians. Larson and Yao (2005) argued that empathy has become a “critical component”
(p. 1104) within the physician–patient relationship and that medical schools should be training and developing empathy among medical students. They also argued that physicians’ empathy with patients leads to more effective healing and more professional satisfaction for the physician. Larson and Yao supported other researchers whose findings indicate that treatment outcomes are improved when empathy is involved (Di Blasi & Kleijnen, 2003; Larson & Yao, 2005).

Another instance illustrating the benefits of empathy for both practitioners and recipients of services can be seen in the field of social work. Gerdes and Segal (2011) indicated the critical nature of empathy for social work practitioners. They suggested that clients have “improved outcomes” (p. 141) when they have received empathic treatment. Clients are not the only ones who benefit from empathy. When social work practitioners are empathic, they are more capable of balancing their roles and are more effective in their work with clients (Gerdes & Segal, 2011).

**An Empathy Deficit**

World leaders also have brought attention to the importance of empathy. Speaking in 2006, then-Senator Barak Obama addressed graduates at a Northwestern University commencement ceremony about an “empathy deficit” facing the nation. He spoke about the necessity of cultivating empathy. He described empathy as “the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us” (Gerdes & Segal, 2011; “Obama,” 2006). Obama indicated that a lot of effort and attention had been spent on discussions regarding the federal deficit but spoke about the importance of focusing on the lack of empathy in our nation; that our culture is one that discourages empathy.
There is some research to support Obama’s assertions. One recent study was conducted by researchers from the University of Michigan. Study authors Konrath and colleagues (2011) found a decrease in dispositional empathy in participants when comparing college student cohorts sampled in the late 1970s and early 1980s to college students sampled in the 1990s and 2000s. According to the study authors, the results suggest a decline in empathy among college students, particularly since 2000 (Konrath et al., 2011).

**Bullying**

Bullying highlights another area in which a lack of empathy among students is evident. Recent studies focus on bullying in middle school and high school students. Bullying has become “a serious problem for US youth” (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2098) and both bullies and victims are at risk for later psychiatric or psychosocial problems as they become adults (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Weiner, 2005; Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying is not a problem just in the United States. Jolliffe and Farrington (2011) studied bullying in England and found that adolescents involved in bullying, both male and female students, had low empathy (particularly affective empathy).

Empathy may provide a way to help students develop prosocial behavior and reduce bullying (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). One evidenced-based emotional literacy curriculum focused on doing that is called Roots of Empathy (see Gordon, 2009). It is gaining recognition and a research base showing its effectiveness with students. For example, Sherman (2011) reported an increase in prosocial behaviors among children who participated in the curriculum.
Increasing Diversity of Children and Families in the United States

According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (Forum), diversity has increased dramatically in the United States within the past 30 years (Forum, 2011). The increase was first seen among children and then later among older adults. The Forum projects that the population will continue to increase in diversity in the coming years and that by 2023 fewer than half of all children will be White, non-Hispanic. The majority of teachers, on the other hand, currently are White, non-Hispanic. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) reported that for the 2007–2008 school year 82.9% of all teachers (elementary and secondary) were White, non-Hispanic. Will the majority of teachers continue to be White, non-Hispanic? If so, this discrepancy between the increasing diversity of students and teachers will require teachers to foster empathy among their students and to cultivate it themselves in order to understand their students’ experiences and the experiences of their families.

Need for Further Study

The potential decline in empathy in college students and the significance of bullying among grade school students combined with changing demographics of children in classrooms underscores a need for further study of empathy in the field of ECE. In other words, if preservice teachers are among those whose empathy is potentially declining and grade school students are being bullied by classmates who have decreased empathy, yet more children are coming from increasingly diverse backgrounds—this presents a situation ripe for cultivating apathy and indifference. If teachers and students are not able to understand each others’ experiences and see each other through a lens of empathy—one that enables people to
understand differences—where does that leave children? What messages are children receiving? What direction would that take the future of education?

Despite other fields’ investigations into empathy in relation to practitioners, research specifically focused on empathy among teachers in ECE has been largely overlooked. In ECE, recent research focused on teachers’ empathy and empathy’s role in partnership with parents has been limited. Recent research that has explored teachers’ empathy has focused on elementary or middle school teachers. For example, in the United Kingdom, Cooper (2004) explored empathic teachers as moral models for students in an elementary school, and in the United States, McAllister and Irvine (2002) studied teachers’ beliefs regarding empathy and its perceived effectiveness with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. A few other examples of research on teacher empathy include: teachers and bullying in elementary school students (Mishna et al., 2005; Yoon & Kerber, 2003) and preservice teachers and empathy via the use of animated narrative vignettes (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007) and via an intervention program (Black & Phillips, 1982). Investigations of empathy in preservice and in-service teachers are needed—both as characteristics and behavior inherent in teachers and in how to promote understanding among teachers and students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. This study explored preschool teachers’ perceptions of empathy and partnership with parents.

**Defining Empathy**

There is no consensus on the definition of empathy, though researchers have indicated the need for one (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Duan & Hill, 1996; Hojat, 2007). As many different fields have taken an interest in empathy, varied use of terminology and ways to define the construct also have emerged (Duan & Hill, 1996). This widespread attention to
empathy has led not only to an increase in our conceptual understanding of empathy, but also to the use of varied definitions, empirical methods, and/or measurement (Hodges, Kiel, Kramer, Veach, & Villanueva, 2010; Decety, 2011). Situated within a historical context of social science, the construct of empathy is one that is relatively recent, extremely complicated, and has been used in different ways by many different scholars (Decety & Ickes, 2009). This can cause confusion and make studying empathy difficult (Decety, 2011). To avoid adding to the confusion, I will briefly describe empathy, provide a few examples of definitions to illustrate distinctions, and define empathy as it relates to this study.

One possible reason for the confusion in defining empathy is that often it is confused with sympathy (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009; Hojat, 2007; Jahoda, 2005). Sympathy can be described as an emotional response that comes from feeling anxious about another’s emotional state (or condition) but is not the same as the other’s emotional state (or condition) and includes feelings of sorrow or concern for the other (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009; Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991). On the other hand, empathy, in the broadest sense, includes a notion of “similarity between the feelings one experiences and those expressed by others” (Decety & Jackson, 2004, p. 71). Decety and Jackson (2004) indicated that researchers, specifically in psychology, generally do agree that empathy has three components: affective, cognitive, and response. They summarized it concisely in this way: “For many psychologists, empathy implies at least three different processes: feeling what another person is feeling, knowing what another person is feeling, and having the intention to respond compassionately to another person’s distress” (p. 73).

Other researchers have included and focused on different aspects in their definitions of empathy. Within the field of social work, Gerdes and Segal (2011) cited a definition of
empathy as “the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person” (Barker, 2003, as cited in Gerdes & Segal, 2011, p. 141). In this example, the idea of the social worker’s perception has been added. A second example illustrating a slightly different operational definition was used in the context of physician–patient relationships. Hojat (2007) described empathy in this way: “Empathy is a predominantly cognitive (rather than emotional) attribute that involves understanding (rather than feeling) of experiences, concerns, and perspectives of the patient, combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding” (p. 8). In this description, the definition has been modified by the additional component of the physician communicating the understood emotional experience of the patient to the patient and a focus on the cognitive aspect.

**Including Positive Empathy**

It seems that, particularly in the fields of psychology and counseling, definitions of empathy incorporate the component of response to distress along with the affective and cognitive components. It should be noted, however, that the ability to empathize with someone else is not limited only to feelings of distress or negative emotions. Empathy extends to positive emotions as well (Light & Zahn-Waxler, 2012). For example, Light and Zahn-Waxler (2012) described empathic happiness and empathic cheerfulness as two types of positive empathy. Empathic happiness occurs when one experiences pleasure or goodwill in response to another’s positive emotions. Empathic cheerfulness is another form of empathy where one shows positive emotion toward a person in distress (Light & Zahn-Waxler, 2012).
Empathy in the Context of Early Childhood Education: A Working Definition

For young children in particular, engaging with others who are empathic and observing empathic exchanges are very important for the development of empathy. Decety and Jackson (2004) indicated that “without social interaction and emotional bonds with others, it is unlikely that empathy develops” (p. 72). Decety and Jackson also discussed the importance of conversation in the development of empathy, as this is often how people share their experiences and feelings. Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990) indicated that the second year of life is a vital period for empathy and prosocial behavior pattern development. A child as young as 2 years of age may have the ability to cognitively interpret at a rudimentary level the physical and psychological states of others, the emotional capability to experience the affective states of others, and a range of behaviors that shows the possible attempts to ease the discomfort of others (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow also reported the interplay of temperament and environment as factors at play in individual differences for children’s concern for others. This speaks to the necessity of early childhood educators to be able to model empathic behavior, not only with other children and parents, but also to be able to foster empathic interactions between children.

In order to discuss empathy as it relates to ECE and partnership, I have incorporated definitions from the research literature of different disciplines. The working definition for empathy from the perspective of the teacher in the context of ECE I have crafted is as follows:

*Empathy, in the context of early care and education, is the ability to: feel what the child or parent is feeling, understand what the child or parent is feeling,*
communicate that understanding to them, and then respond in a way to help meet their needs.

Feshbach and Feshbach (2009) discussed research on teacher empathy as reflecting a therapeutic process, specifically that as influenced by Carl Rogers. They described the teacher as akin to the therapist and student as akin to the client. According to Feshbach and Feshbach, for teacher empathy, the ability to understand students’ experience is necessary, but not enough. The communication aspect of empathy via student–teacher interaction is crucial. I build from existing definitions by extending empathy to parents (and/or other family members) and incorporating the response element framed in a help-giving way as influenced by family-centered practice, which I will discuss further in the section on partnerships.

Two Caveats: Empathy Fatigue and Developmental Stages of Teachers

In the extreme, for those in helping or person-centered professions such as nursing, psychology, and counseling, responding to and healing others through their own empathy can lead to empathy fatigue (Stebnicki, 2008). Teachers also may encounter empathy fatigue (De Heus & Diekstra, 1999). Stebnicki (2008) described empathy fatigue for counselors as “resulting from a state of psychological, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and occupational exhaustion that occurs as the counselors’ own wounds are continually revisited by their clients’ life stories of chronic illness, disability, trauma, grief, and loss” (p. 3). Other disciplines, Stebnicki pointed out, have used terminology such as compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and vicarious traumatization to describe what he terms, empathy fatigue. Compared with other helping professionals, teachers not only experience
empathy fatigue or burn out, but they also tend to burn out more easily (De Heus & Diekstra, 1999).

In addition to empathy fatigue, the developmental stage of the teacher should also be taken into consideration in discussions of empathy. According to Katz (1972), preschool teachers go through developmental stages during the course of their own professional growth. Katz described four stages and approximate time periods during which a teacher might experience that stage: stage 1, survival (year 1); stage 2, consolidation (years 2–3); stage 3, renewal (years 3 or 4); and stage 4, maturity (years 5+). According to Katz, during stage 1, survival, a teacher’s main worry is whether or not he or she will survive the year. In stage 2, consolidation, Katz describes a teacher as ready to distinguish the skills she or he wants to improve and focus on next. In stage 3, renewal, the teacher may feel ready to try new things and may be tired of what he or she has done in the past. In stage 4, maturity, a teacher has perspective and experience and may begin to ask her- or himself questions along a more abstract line regarding philosophy of teaching.

Katz (1972) also suggested corresponding means of providing training and assistance to the teachers within those stages to help meet their needs. She suggested that the training needs should correspond to a teacher’s stage in professional development to be most effective. For example, teachers in stage 1 require on-site support and assistance that is readily available. Stage 2 teachers may require on-site assistance in addition to access to other professionals with a wide range of resources and knowledge. During stage 3, teachers may benefit from formal and informal training with colleagues such as through professional associations. Finally, stage 4 teachers may want to further advance their knowledge through conferences but may not need the same level of on-site support as does a stage 1 teacher.
These stages of assistance may provide insight into ways to provide support for teachers in regard to empathy as well.

My intention in the discussion of empathy is not to discount the emotional needs of individual teachers or place additional strain on them as they are progressing through their own stages of professional growth and development. Rather, I want to underscore the importance of maintaining empathy with children and families within the bounds of healthy practice. One way to do this includes working with children and families through building partnerships, which I discuss in the next section.

**Partnerships**

Collaboration between parents and professionals is viewed as a vital piece of education, early intervention, family support, and other health and human services (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). It is crucial for children’s development and learning (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). I will discuss collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers in the context of ECE. The following sections focus on how partnerships are grounded in a family-centered philosophy and practices—based on theory and policy—and how researchers have tried to define partnerships and corresponding characteristics.

**Family-Centered Practices: Grounded in Theory and Policy**

Family-centered practices build from family theory and policies related to families in early childhood (Brotherson, Summers, Bruns, & Sharp, 2008). As Brotherson et al. (2008) pointed out, family theories such as bioecological theory and family systems theory provide a solid frame for understanding family-centered policy. (I discuss both of these theories further as they relate to data analysis in Chapter 3.) Briefly, bioecological theory recognizes that development occurs within a context, the family being the most immediate and earliest
family systems theory shows interaction between all parts (people) of the system; if something happens to one person, the rest of the family is also affected (Brotherson et al., 2008). Dunst and Trivette (2010) expanded on these theories, specifically citing Bronfenbrenner (1992), indicating family-centered capacity-building helping practices recognize and support that all people have strengths and the capacity to become more capable and competent, and the belief that by supporting and strengthening family capacity, parents and other caregivers are in a better position to provide children development-instigating and development enhancing learning opportunities and experiences. (Dunst & Trivette, 2010, p. 364)

In a model focused on family-centered practices, attention is given to families as a whole, family choice and decision making are honored, strengths and capabilities of families are highlighted, families are treated with respect, and practices are individualized and flexible (Brotherson et al., 2008; Dunst & Trivette, 2010). This strengths-based model has shifted away from a medical model, which was focused on deficits of the child and/or family.

Early childhood policy, including Parts B and C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), also establishes a foundation for family-centered practices (Bruder, 2010). Part B of IDEA, provides educational and other related services for children ages 3 to 21 years of age. It also includes related services for families, such as: information, family counseling, training for parents, and social work (Brotherson et al., 2008). Part C of IDEA focuses on infants and young children from birth through age 2 years (Trohanis, 2008). It requires a range of services, not only for the child, but also for the families, and includes training for parents, family counseling, transportation, social work,
information, and education (Brotherson et al., 2008). Head Start and Early Head Start are other examples of where family partnership is included within the policy (Brotherson et al., 2008; Schumacher, 2003). These programs are required to build partnerships with parents.

**Partnerships: Rooted in Family-Centered Philosophy and Practices**

Partnerships between teachers and parents are firmly rooted in family-centered principles and practices. Partnerships can be defined as “relationships between families and professionals in which they mutually agree to defer to each other’s judgments and expertise” (Turnbull et al., 2006, p. 110). As Turnbull et al. (2006) stressed, central to the idea of partnership is equality between parents and professionals whereby all parties work together to achieve a “collective wisdom” (p. 110). The basis of healthy partnerships includes collaborative relationships that benefit the child, the family, and the professional (Brotherson et al., 2010). Researchers have tried to identify which elements are the most important to partnerships (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). The resulting traits, sometimes referred to as the “dimensions of partnerships” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004) often include respect, trust, open communication, equality, listening, and nonjudgment (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dunst & Trivette, 2010).

Despite attempts by researchers to classify and point out key qualities in parent–professional partnerships, as Dunst and Trivette (2010) indicated, there is no overall agreement in the particular characteristics that comprise partnership or even how to operationally define it. They also pointed out that it is difficult to distinguish the “defining characteristics” (Dunst & Trivette, 2010, p. 364) of good parent–professional partnerships from the important traits of other caring relationships, ethical standards, or effective helpgiving practices. They contended that partnerships should be thought of as a piece of a
broader category of family-centered helpgiving practices (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). I will describe further the family-centered helpgiving practices in the next section.

**Relational and Participatory Family-Centered Helpgiving Practices**

Dunst and Trivette (2010) described relational and participatory helpgiving practices that are utilized in work with families. These practices focus on treating families with respect and building the capabilities of families. Relational practices are those that generally are thought of as found in good clinical practice (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). Empathy has been specified as one aspect of good clinical relational practice, along with active listening, compassion, and respect (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). Another piece of relational practice includes the helpgiver usually holding a strengths-based view of families (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). Participatory helpgiving practices are those that involve sharing information with families so they can make their own informed decisions; they are individualized, flexible, and responsive to the concerns and priorities of the families (Dunst & Trivette, 2010). Dunst and Trivette indicated that most parent–professional partnership literature has focused on aspects or dimensions of partnership that are categorized as relational practices but contend that the participatory practices may be the ones that provide families with the most capacity-building elements.

LeCompte (2000) asserted that empathy is a necessary component of healthy relationships. Healthy relationships between teachers and parents is a necessary precursor for family-school partnerships in school (Clarke, Sheridan, & Woods, 2010; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). As Konrath et al. (2011) put it, “Empathy seems to enable people to relate to others in a way that promotes cooperation and unity rather than conflict and isolation” (p. 180). Empathy, as I have defined it, includes elements of both relational and participatory
helpgiving practices that are important for working with families. It has the capacity to enable parents and teachers to work together in partnership in the context of ECE. Therefore, engaging with and responding to the family’s and child’s needs with empathy may be an important aspect of partnerships and the broader helpgiving practices. Empathy, as one piece of a larger partnership puzzle, enables the understanding of different perspectives, assists in resolving differences in a respectful way, and is an important example to set and foster for young children in ECE.

Conclusion

In this literature review I presented relevant research on empathy and the benefits of empathy as it relates to ECE. I discussed different definitions of and conceptualizations of empathy from other disciplines. I included a definition of empathy that I crafted, which incorporated different aspects of empathy from other disciplines with the intention of clarifying the meaning for the purposes of this research. Relevant research literature on partnership and family-centered philosophy, policy, and practices was also integrated. I discussed how empathy could be used to help to strengthen partnerships through the use of family-centered practices.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

And seeing the world through another’s eyes
is like busting a window in a house of lies
and in the end you make up your own mind.

Ani Difranco (2012)

Background Information

My research builds from one subset of data from a larger study, Building Foundations for Self-Determination in Young Children with Disabilities (FSD; Summers, Brotherson, Palmer, Erwin, & Maude, 2009). The FSD research team investigated how to support what they consider the “foundations of self-determination” (choice, self-regulation, and engagement) through a partnership between ECE teachers and family members. The research team consisted of five principal investigators and five graduate students across three universities. My research includes interview data collected through initial open-ended qualitative interviews with preschool teachers who taught in inclusive classrooms, and builds upon those interviews with follow-up interviews. Both initial and follow-up interviews were included in data analysis.

Reflexivity and Researcher as Instrument

Researcher reflexivity has to do with the process of examining the “self as researcher” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2002). It required me to critically reflect not only on my relationship to the research topic and how that affected the choices I made during data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002; Lincoln and Guba, 2000), but also on how my interactions with the participants and the topic of interest all interacted and influenced each other (Glesne, 2006). As a way to address reflexivity during data collection and analysis, I wrote formal and informal memos addressing these topics. In the following paragraph, I will
give a brief summary of how I viewed myself as an instrument of this research (see Appendix A for a sample memo).

As far back as I can remember I have tried to be empathic and nonjudgmental of others. I remember one instance when my father feared my empathy might get the best of his then, naïve, 16-year-old daughter. I had just gotten my driver’s permit, and my father was coaching me through my first drive in a heavy downpour. The roads were slick and the windshield wipers were swishing back and forth at top speed. As we neared the entrance to the highway, we could see a hitchhiker standing next to the road. We drove closer and he extended his hand, thumb raised. My father looked at me and very sternly warned, “Nancy, keep driving. Don’t ever, ever stop to pick up a hitchhiker; even if it’s cold and raining.” I told him not to worry, I would not pick up hitchhikers and that I knew better; but as we passed the man standing there, soaked to the bone, I felt for him. I made empathic inferences, wondering to myself what it must have been like standing there; where he was going to go that night; and if he had any food or family. It seems I have always been asking myself what it might be like to be in another’s place. So my inquiry into empathy and its place in relationships seems a natural extension of a familiar characteristic, albeit one I have never before explored through research.

In addition to my personal interest in empathy, I approached this research through two distinct lenses; as a parent of a young child and as a former early childhood educator. First, I brought the perspective of a mother of an infant who relies on a family-based childcare provider to care for my child part time. Placing my daughter in care was a very difficult decision for me, and I did so reluctantly at the realization that I would not be able to
complete this work without help. I struggled with the same “mommy guilt” that many other working mothers feel.

One particular reason for my hesitation in placing my daughter in care is also the second lens through which I viewed this research—that of a former early childhood educator. More specifically, I taught a very diverse group of toddlers, children 18 months through 3 years of age. For over two years, my classroom was situated in a center-based childcare program. Prior to that, I was living in a large city and worked as a private nanny for two families, both of whom had infants and toddlers. During that same time, I was also employed as a postpartum doula, caring primarily for newborns and their mothers. I also provided information and support to those families as requested. These experiences, both formal classroom practices and informal in-home encounters, allowed me to literally step inside the lives of a diverse group of families with young children before I had my own child. They allowed me opportunities to understand, to feel, and to respond to the experiences and emotions of both young children and their parents in many diverse settings. Thus, my interest in learning about how to build partnerships with families began.

I am passionate about ECE and hold high standards of care provision for myself and others. It was difficult for me to share the responsibility of care for my daughter with another—a non-familial, though highly competent and loving, provider. I trusted this caregiver completely but, simply put, I wanted to be the one to care for my daughter. I did not want to admit that I needed help in order to complete my research and other academic responsibilities.

It is through both of these lenses—as a mother of a young child and as a former early childhood educator—that I viewed and interpreted this work. Using these lenses allowed me
to relate to and interact with the preschool teachers during interviews as I would one of my
former colleagues. I could empathize; we spoke the same language. I understood many of
the experiences they described and had been in some of the same situations. Likewise, my
parent lens allowed me to understand and empathize with the anecdotes they shared about the
families’ with whom they partnered. I could also put myself in their place and make
empathic inferences about what an experience might have been like from the families’
perspective. Throughout the study I reflected critically on both of these lenses and how my
experiences and biases as a researcher affected the choices I made during data collection and
analysis.

Research Team

The concepts of researcher as instrument and researcher reflexivity also have a
collaborative element because I worked as part of a team. I have included this section to
provide more information about the research team with whom I worked and to enable the
reader to have a greater understanding of how this team was reflexive as a group and
contributed to my interpretation of the data. “Researcher as instrument” acknowledges that
the researcher(s) is the one who collects the data (Creswell, 2007), selects the data to analyze,
and then interprets the data (Finlay, 2002). We were all working as “instruments” of data
collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002) for the initial
interviews.

I conducted 3 of the 18 initial interviews. The rest of the interviews were conducted
by fellow researchers, both principal investigators and fellow graduate students. Members of
the research team completed an Interview Summary Form (see Appendix B) directly
following initial interviews. The summaries of the interviews were discussed by the larger
team via weekly conference calls. I conducted the five follow-up interviews and also completed a slightly adapted Interview Summary Form (see Appendix C) immediately after each interview. I used the summary forms from both research team members as well as my own as part of the data used in analysis. The lenses I used to view this data were included and considered as part of the context for the findings (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of my research was to understand, from the teachers’ perspectives and through my interpretations, how teachers expressed empathy for children and families. I wanted to learn how teachers developed empathic understanding for children, families, and cultural practices and in what ways that may (or may not) have fostered their partnerships with families. Therefore, the following two research questions were addressed:

1. In what ways do teachers express empathy in their relationships with young children and families?
2. What are preschool teachers’ perceptions of empathy in the parent–teacher partnership?

**Methodology**

**Ethnography**

This ethnography is grounded in a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective within a constructivist epistemology. According to Crotty (1998), the constructionist views knowledge or the creation of knowledge in this way, “Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (p. 8). In other words, constructionists believe that meaning is created, not discovered. Crotty went on to write, “Different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the
same phenomenon” (p. 9). Fundamental to the symbolic interactionist perspective is the idea of “putting oneself in the place of the other” (Crotty, 1998, p. 75). In symbolic interactionism, the emphasis is on seeing, from the perspective of the participant, their perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and interpreting their meaning (Crotty, 1998). This is appropriate for a study focused on empathy. Ethnography is focused specifically on understanding the shared and learned patterns that are part of a cultural group (Creswell, 2007). These patterns may include the values, beliefs, and language used among those in the group (Creswell, 2007). The group in this research was inclusive preschool teachers and their beliefs and expressions of empathy as they described them. I constructed meaning based on the information gathered in the interviews conducted. One component to ethnographic research is prolonged engagement in the research context. As this was not possible for this research, I consider it a limitation and will discuss it in further detail in the limitations section.

**Other Theoretical Influences**

The two other theories that guided my work were the family systems theory (FST) and Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. As Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, and Karnik (2009) pointed out, the purpose of theory is “to provide a framework within which to explain connections among the phenomena under study and to provide insights leading to the discovery of new connections” (p. 198). The authors described the goal of much empirical work as testing the fit of the theory with the specific phenomena under study. For my work and for qualitative research in general, however, theory is not used to test the model or the fit of a particular theory with data. Theory is used to help the researcher make sense of the data, see connections, and highlight relationships that may otherwise be overlooked (Maxwell,
Two “problems” with theory in qualitative research, as described by Maxwell (2005), are “not using it enough, and by relying too heavily and uncritically on it” (p. 46). Maxwell described the need for theory to guide research design and the decisions made during research but cautioned that when theory is imposed on a study, it can prevent the researcher from seeing events and relationships that do not fit in with the theory premises.

I will discuss how, in an effort to balance the need for theory to guide my research, heed Maxwell’s (2005) caution and not fall prey to theory clouding my interpretations of the data, I used family systems theory and Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. Tudge et al. (2009) recommend explicitly stating the manner in which the theory is used to avoid misleading readers and to lend clarity to the findings. Therefore, I will discuss how the theories provided a conceptual framework for both the thought process throughout my research and how they served to guide and shape my interpretations of data.

**Family systems theory.** FST provided a way to help guide my thoughts during data analysis from the viewpoint of the young children and families with whom the teachers were working. FST sees the family as a connected group of separate relationships (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Klein, 2005). According to FST, “a family processes information by moving and transforming it through the family’s component parts” (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005, p. 42). Turnbull et al. (2006) used the metaphor of a mobile to describe family systems theory: When one piece of the mobile is moved, movement will also occur in the other parts.

The child and the parents, all of whom are parts of their family’s system, are interacting with the child’s teacher. If the interactions are negative, it could be processed through the child and/or parent and cause disruption to the family as a whole. Likewise, if
interactions are positive and are processed through the child and/or parent, the rest of the family also could be affected, presumably in a beneficial way. It is important to also point out that teachers, despite being in the role of the professional in the parent–teacher partnership, are also part of their own family system. Interactions (both positive and negative) with children and families in their classrooms could seemingly filter in to and have an effect on their families as well. FST theory helped to guide my thoughts during data analysis, and this is reflected in the emergent themes.

**Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory.** Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory also influenced my thought process during data analysis. Bronfenbrenner’s theory is focused on the study of human development over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The model comprises four main components—process, person, context, and time (PPCT)—and the dynamic relationships among them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I will briefly describe the model and how I incorporated it into my research.

**Process.** Processes are key factors in development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Tudge et al., 2009) and a core of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). More specifically, proximal processes occur as enduring interactions in the immediate environment of the developing person that occur over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). They are thought of as the primary mechanism by which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009). Proximal processes vary by and are dependent upon other characteristics of the developing **person**, the **contexts** in which they are situated, and the **time** in which they take place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

**Person.** Bronfenbrenner described the person characteristics of demand, resource, and force in his model. Demand provides an immediate stimulus for another person (e.g., age,
gender, physical appearance; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). Resource
is associated with mental and emotional resources and intelligence, but they may not be
immediately obvious to another person (e.g., access to food, housing, opportunities for
education; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). Force has to do with
differences between people in areas such as temperament, motivation, and persistence
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). These all are characteristics that a
person brings to a social interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009).

Context. The context is the environment in which the developing person is engaged.
The model includes four interrelated systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and
macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). The microsystem
includes the context in which the developing person spends time engaging with people and
activities (Tudge et al., 2009) such as a young child’s home or school. The mesosystem
represents the interrelations among microsystems (Tudge et al., 2009). The developing
person is not physically present in the exosystem, but it has an indirect effect on him or her;
such as a parent’s workplace in relation to a young child (Tudge et al., 2009). Finally, the
macrosystem subsumes the other systems, influences them, and is also influenced by them.
The macrosystem refers to “a context encompassing any group” (Tudge et al., 2009, p. 201).
A child and her family may be part of a particular culture that may affect how a child and her
family view and participate in activities in the classroom.

Time. Bronfenbrenner discussed time in terms of micro-, meso-, and macro-time
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009) within the model. Micro-time refers to
what is happening during a specific activity or interaction (Tudge et al., 2009). Meso-time
includes the activities and interactions that “occur with some consistency” (Tudge et al.,
Macro-time refers to the idea that events in history have an influence over the developmental processes of the developing person (Tudge et al., 2009).

In the context of this research, the environment and sense of community that teachers create provide a foundation for these interactions within the classroom; and the children also play a part in influencing the environment. The classroom becomes a place where children engage in activities and interact with others. These interactions are considered proximal processes when they occur “on a fairly regular basis, over an extended period of time” and “become increasingly more complex” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798). Through these interactions, children learn to understand their world and how they fit within it (Tudge et al., 2009). Proximal processes can be influential in how children learn to interact with others. Relating specifically to empathy, Goleman (1995) cited findings by researchers Radke-Yarrow and Zahn-Waxler (1984), indicating “that children’s empathy is also shaped by seeing how others react when someone else is distressed; by imitating what they see, children develop a repertoire of empathic response, especially in helping other people who are distressed” (p. 99).

The person characteristics of the children and of the teachers within the classroom influence the proximal processes (Tudge et al, 2009) and were thoughtfully considered during analysis. The concepts of context and time were influential during data analysis as well. Context, including the ideas of microsystem and macrosystem, was evident during data analysis as encompassing referents that the teachers described. I discuss this more specifically in the section on data analysis. The influence of time also can be seen in the eventual themes as teachers discussed their experiences with empathy and the development of empathy.
Participants

Initial Interviews

The research team used criterion and convenience sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) to recruit participants for the qualitative interviews upon receipt of approval from each university’s institutional review board (IRB; see Appendices D, E, and F for stamped consent forms). Participants were invited to participate because they were all early childhood professionals who, at the time of the interviews, were employed in inclusive preschool settings, serving young children between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Participants resided in five different states, one situated along the East coast, and four in the Midwest. The researchers interviewed teachers employed in a variety of early childhood settings situated in urban, suburban, and rural locations. The research team members attempted to recruit a diverse group of early childhood educators (e.g., ethnic backgrounds and educational levels). Flyers (see Appendix G) were e-mailed to administrators via personal contacts at preschools and childcare centers. After receiving approval from administrators, the research team members were provided with names of potential teachers who might be willing to participate in an interview. The sample for initial interviews included 18 participants.

Participants were all female and ranged between 24 and 64 years of age. Six participants were between the ages of 24 and 29, four were between the ages of 30 and 34, two were between the ages of 35 and 39, one was between the ages of 40 and 44, two were between the ages of 45 and 49, two were between the ages of 55 and 59, and one was between the ages of 60 and 64. We asked participants to describe their ethnicity. The majority of participants (15) identified themselves as Caucasian; however, one identified as African American; one as Puerto Rican and Caucasian, and one as Latina and Caucasian.
Eleven of the teachers held a master’s level degree, six held a bachelor’s degree, and one was working toward an associate’s degree. Most of the teachers considered their community to be either a small city or an urbanized area. The preschools were a mix of both public and private schools. Preschools also varied in their programming, offering full-day and half-day options.

Most of the participants were preschool classroom teachers, although some were not. One participant was a kindergarten teacher and one was an assistant teacher who worked in multiple rooms within the preschool center. A couple of the participants had different roles within the early childhood classroom where they provided special education consulting services (also called facilitation) for preschool teachers who had children with special educational needs included in their class. These teachers were itinerant and traveled to a variety of different classrooms each day. Because the study spanned multiple states, the teachers and schools each had their own terminology and language surrounding programming and services. We asked teachers to describe in their own words their classrooms and job titles.

The children with whom the teachers worked also had a variety of strengths and abilities. They had special needs ranging from mild to more significant including, for example, delays in speech and behavioral concerns to autism spectrum disorders. One criterion for the FSD study during the initial interviews was that the teachers who were interviewed had at least one child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or was undergoing an evaluation for an IEP in their class. The demographic information for the participants is provided in Table 1.
### Table 1

**Demographic Information of Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Community size</th>
<th>Highest degree earned</th>
<th>Job title&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>Program type (Private/public)</th>
<th>Class type (Full day/half day)</th>
<th>Children with IEP&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Small city</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>EC Consultant&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>55–59</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>ECSE inclusion facilitator&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>ECSE teacher&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
<td>Working toward associates</td>
<td>Teacher associate (floater)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Full day</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blythe</td>
<td>24–29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Small city</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Optional kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Half day&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Small city</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Head teacher</td>
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<td>Private</td>
<td>Full day</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Masters</td>
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<td>ECSE teacher</td>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>Half day&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Masters</td>
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<td>Masters</td>
<td>Preschool teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Half day&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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Table 1 (continued)

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<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Community Size</th>
<th>Highest degree earned</th>
<th>Job title&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
<th>Program type (Private/public)</th>
<th>Class type (Full day/half day)</th>
<th>Children with IEP&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
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<td>Full day</td>
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<td>Lead teacher</td>
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<td>Full day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Small city</td>
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<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>Public</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
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<tr>
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<td>African American</td>
<td>Small city</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Lead teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Full day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>Note. </sup>Teacher’s names are pseudonyms; all teachers are female.

<sup>a</sup>Job title as described by teacher: EC = Early Childhood, ECSE = Early Childhood Special Education. <sup>b</sup>Total number of children with IEPs with whom the teacher works; IEP = Individualized Education Plan. <sup>c</sup>Teacher is itinerant. <sup>d</sup>Teachers who participated in follow-up interviews. <sup>e</sup>Half-day programs offer both AM and PM sessions. <sup>f</sup>Two children were undergoing evaluation for IEP services, 0 children had established IEPs at the time of interview.
Follow-up Interviews

Permission to conduct follow-up interviews for clarification purposes were part of the consent forms for initial interviews. Because I wanted to focus on empathy and partnership, I applied for and was granted approval with my university’s IRB to complete the second round of interviews. The intent of the follow-up interviews was to conduct member checks for clarification based on information gathered during the initial interviews and to further follow-up on the topics of empathy and partnership. Using criterion sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), 6 of the 18 participants met the criteria I designated for follow-up interviews. I contacted those six participants to inquire about a follow-up interview. Five participants agreed to participate. One person did not respond to an e-mail or phone message inviting her to participate.

I broadly used Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory as a guide as the critical and empathic statements emerged. The statements began to align on levels of the child, family, and/or cultural practices of the families. This helped shape my thinking and inquiry related to the second research question of how teachers developed empathic understanding for children, families, and cultural practices; and in what ways that may (or may not) have fostered their partnerships with families. The criteria for follow-up interviews were based on the preliminary analysis of the initial interviews. Therefore, I based the decision regarding who to invite for a follow-up interview on the following four criteria: (a) Teachers expressed empathic statements only on the ecological levels of child, family, and/or cultural practice of the families with whom they worked; participants were included only if they had made no critical statements about the children, families, and/or cultural practices of the families with whom they worked; if a participant made even one critical statement on any ecological level
of child, family, or culture, they were not invited to participate; (b) teachers’ statements were
categorized as having been empathic on at least two of the three ecological levels (e.g., child
and family, or child and cultural practices), but preference was given to teachers who made
empathic statements on all three levels; (c) teachers described their partnerships with families
or attitudes about partnerships with families in a predominantly positive way; and (d) the
richness of the first interview was taken into consideration when selecting participants for
follow-up interviews; I wanted to interview participants who seemed open to sharing
information and were descriptive in their initial interviews.

**Data Collection**

**Initial Interviews**

The FSD principal investigators contacted potential participants through recruitment
flyers. The intent of the initial qualitative interviews was to gather more information about
how teachers understood the foundations of self-determination and what strategies they were
currently using in their classrooms. Research team members then contacted the potential
participants either by phone or e-mail to schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted
both in person and over the phone. Five interviews were conducted over the phone when a
face-to-face interview was not possible because of distance or a schedule conflict. The
interviews were conducted by both senior members and graduate student members of the
research team. The participants were asked questions from an IRB-approved qualitative
interview protocol, which included grand tour questions and follow-up probes (see Appendix
H for the complete interview protocol). Sample prompts and questions include: “Tell me
about your classroom”; “How do your students manage their own behaviors and emotions?”;
“What opportunities do children have for making their own choices during the day?”; “What
does a successful partnership with parents look like to you?”; and “What specifically do you do that helps to foster partnerships with parents?” The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Participants each were given an honorarium in the form of a $25 gift card at the end of the interview for their time. Each research team member completed an Interview Summary Sheet (see Appendix B) directly following each interview he or she conducted. The summary sheets included an overview of the main points of the interview, initial thoughts, analytic memos, and questions that arose during the interview. The summary sheets also were used as a guide during research team discussions on emerging data. Meeting minutes were taken during conference calls and also were used as a source of data.

**Follow-up Interviews**

After a preliminary analysis of the initial interviews (see Data Analysis section), I contacted six participants based on the criteria previously described. Five of the initial interview participants agreed to a follow-up interview; one did not respond to a request for an interview. One interview took place face to face; the other four were conducted over the phone due to distance. Follow-up interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, were recorded, and then transcribed. I used an IRB-approved interview protocol that listed grand tour questions along with follow-up probes (see Appendix I for a complete protocol). Examples of specific questions include: “What, specifically, has helped you to develop empathy for the children/families/cultural practices with whom you work?”; “How, if at all, do you think being empathetic helps to build partnerships with families?”; and “How do you perceive empathy to affect your relationships with families?”
I began each follow-up interview by doing a member check with participants. To set the context and reorient the participant with the former interview, I read a sample statement from the participant’s first interview. Then, I indicated how I interpreted the exemplar passage and asked the participant if my understanding resonated with her. I asked if she had any corrections or additions to make in order to clarify my understanding and interpretation. Each participant indicated that my interpretation resonated with her and she could see how I came to that understanding. I then proceeded with the follow-up questions from the protocol. Participants were sent three children’s books for their classrooms as an honorarium following the interviews. I completed an interview summary sheet (see Appendix C) immediately following each interview.

**Data Analysis**

Before discussing how I coded and further analyzed the data, I would like to clarify that my intention in coding and analysis was not to label the teachers themselves. Rather, I wanted the focus to be on my interpretations of the teachers’ statements, as opposed to (and not to be confused with) a classification of their character. These interviews represent just a small fraction of what a teacher may say or do, and I did not want this sample of statements in any way to misrepresent a teacher or have her viewed as being only judgmental or critical. In my interpretation I have conceptually opposed empathy and criticism. They are not mutually exclusive concepts, but in this case I found it difficult for them to not be at odds.

Statements that I interpreted as critical in nature were considered within the context of the broader conversation of the participants’ interviews. If I was unsure of how to interpret a particular passage, I would listen to the audio file and consider the tone of voice or the way the participant made the statement to help me gauge and interpret the intent of the
statement. I explain my interpretations further in Chapter 4. Findings. Consistent with qualitative research, it is quite possible that someone else who analyzes the same passages may come to different conclusions.

Because I was not interested in how to promote judgment or criticism among teachers toward children, their families, or the families’ cultural practices, I did not follow up with teachers who made comments I interpreted as critical in nature. Nor did I want to label teachers’ expressions as solely critical or judgmental, because I believed that would be misrepresentative. As I will describe further in the following sections, all but two of the teachers who made critical statements also made some expression of empathy in their statements. For this reason, I saw their overall empathy distorted or clouded by the conflicting negative statements and criticism about the children, their families, and/or their cultural practices.

The teachers were selected in their initial interviews because they taught in classrooms that were inclusive of children with disabilities. In both the initial interviews and follow-up interviews, the teachers discussed strategies and described situations that they used with all children and families, not only those they used with children who had disabilities and their families. Thus for clarity, I will talk about ECE in a general sense and not refer to the subset of early childhood special education.

In the following sections I describe the coding and analysis process I used in the initial interviews, which I discuss as the first, second, and third cycles of coding and analysis. I then detail the coding and analysis process for the follow-up interviews, which are the fourth and fifth cycles of analysis. The overall coding and analysis process that led to the development of the study’s themes is depicted in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Analysis process overview.
Initial Interviews

After all 18 of the initial interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, I began with a first round of open or initial coding for the interviews, interview summary sheets, and meeting minutes from our research team conference calls. Each interview transcription and interview summary sheet was printed and then coded, initially by hand. As interviews were not discussed during each conference call, I coded only those that included information pertaining to interviews. I later transferred the information to an electronic codebook that I created and updated continuously during analysis. The codebook contained the codes, brief descriptions of the codes, and exemplar quotes from the data as they emerged (Saldaña, 2009; see Appendix J for example). I simultaneously used a combination of attribute, descriptive, and in vivo coding techniques during this first cycle, open-ended approach to coding (Saldaña, 2009).

Methods of coding: The first two cycles of analysis. Attribute coding was used at the beginning of data analysis to note basic descriptive information about participants (Saldaña, 2009). Saldaña (2009) recommended the use of attribute coding in aiding data management for qualitative studies with multiple participants and locations. I used attribute coding to assist me in getting to know the participants I did not interview. As I was becoming familiar with the participants during the first cycle of open coding, I was also taking note of specific descriptive information about the text. Saldaña indicated descriptive codes are appropriate to note the topics of discussion in the interviews. I wrote short words or phrases to identify the topics of a passage of text (Saldaña, 2009). I used in vivo coding to note participants’ own words. I wrote a few words that were directly from the transcript to
reflect a section of dialogue. See Table 2 for a summary of coding methods and examples of text.

After initially coding all of the interviews, it became more apparent the areas of empathy and partnership were emerging as salient. The coding process became more focused, and I completed a second cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2009). As I mentioned previously, I transferred information I had coded by hand to an electronic codebook. After each day of coding, I saved the electronic codebook as a “new file” in order to show the changes that had been made. I continued to refine and code the initial interview passages of transcribed text that related to the topics of empathy and partnership (see Appendix K for an example). Pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009) was used to help

Table 2.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Coding Method Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of code</strong></td>
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<td>Attribute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In vivo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second cycle coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
develop the conceptual and thematic organization of the data (Saldaña, 2009). For example, “communication” was a code that I wrote again and again that often coincided with the topic of partnership. As more interviews contained the descriptors such as “open” and “ongoing,” I began to see a pattern that teachers saw “ongoing, open communication” as an important part of the partnership concept (see Table 2 for a sample). The preliminary codes were recoded, reorganized, and categorized within the electronic files to further develop a theoretical organization (Saldaña, 2009; see Appendix L for example).

**A third cycle of analysis: The influence of bioecological theory.** In order to give me a better picture and help me to focus exclusively on the topics of empathy and partnership, working from the electronic codebook, I created electronic tables for each of the 18 initial interviews. I looked at this as a third cycle of coding. These tables included passages of text that were categorized broadly by the emergent patterns of empathy or criticism. I included exemplar statements from the initial interviews which I interpreted as being empathic or critical in nature.

I used Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) broadly as a guide to situate my thought processes and help to further focus and refine data analysis. It influenced the categorization of both the empathic and critical statements, as described next. The statements focused on three main levels: the child, the child’s family, and/or the family’s cultural practices. The statements that focused on the child and the child’s family correspond to Bronfenbrenner’s concept of microsystem. The statements that focused on the family’s cultural practices correspond to Bronfenbrenner’s concept of macrosystem. I separated the levels of child and family despite both being a part of the microsystem to better distinguish the referent of the teachers’ statement. The label of “child”
or “family” was more specific than “microsystem” in helping to denote who or what the teacher referenced. Similarly, the label of “culture” or “cultural practices” was a more specific description than “macrosystem” during the coding process. For clarity, I will refer to the levels rather than their bioecological theory counterparts.

A visual overview of how the participants’ statements were categorized is provided in Figure 2 and includes how I interpreted their statements in this third cycle of analysis. Shown in Figure 2 is: teacher pseudonym; exemplar statements I interpreted as either empathic or critical in nature (the checked boxes provide a visual reference, the page of the initial transcript is included for retrieval); exemplar statements regarding partnership; the

<table>
<thead>
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<th>2. Pseudonym</th>
<th>Exemplar</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy</strong></td>
<td><strong>I want to do home visits before the beginning of the school year with all my kids. It was such a great time. It meant a lot to the families. It meant a lot to me. I think everyone was a little apprehensive at first. Pg. 8. [family].</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Memo: empathy focused on family perspective/feelings - can tell home visits meant a lot to families. Also shows understanding that there may have been feelings of apprehension prior to home visits by families.

[understanding that home visits may cause apprehension for families- but that in the end meant a lot to everyone- influences practice with children/families- she wants to do home visits with all families next year]

We had a child at the beginning of the school year who had just moved here from China and that culture experience was a lot for her to take on. I think it was a lot for the whole family. Dad said, “What we do is we’re with the child for the first three days of school. So we want to be here from beginning to end.” You have to respect that because you want the child to be successful. But obviously it’s something that they both needed. I think he ended up staying for like 5 days. It was working on the individual level of what everyone needs. Parents can always come for lunch or volunteer activities. Pg. 28. [child, family, culture]

Memo: Teacher empathy on child, family, culture levels- shows understanding in child’s and parent’s experiences with new culture (family circumstances, challenge of a new culture); that respecting family culture is necessary for success of the child- but also for the parent. Shows consideration for needs of child and family.

[Empathy influences teacher’s practices in classroom- accepting family in for the success of the child]

*Figure 2. Empathy analysis template.*
Critical statements

<table>
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<th>None found</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Partnership**

But you’re not going to like every single parent and every parent is not going to like you, which I’m a pleaser, so I’m still coming to terms with that one. Understanding that you still have a job to that child to make sure that you’re communicating as openly as you possibly can. p. 27.

Memo: recognizes that even in partnership, there will be challenges- and may not click with every parent- but despite that, it is necessary to work with families for the child’s benefit by using open communication.

[Empathy influences communication practices with parents]

Well, we have that relationship in our classroom right now with a family. What I’ve found to be the most effective is we always fill out that communication sheet. We always say, “Hello” and “Goodbye” at departure. Maybe just quick notes too. You still owe it to the child. You still need to model how to engage people even if they don’t want to engage you. It’s hard and I wouldn’t say I’ve very good at doing it every day. You try to put it out there once in a while. Some parents just communicate better through e-mail or newsletters. We have a whiteboard where I write information about what we did that day, questions to ask your child when you go home at night. You still have to remember even if they don’t want to talk to me, I’m still putting out forms of communication that they can take and use to help interact with their child. Pg. 28-29. [re: how to approach parent that you feel more challenged or it doesn’t click- see transcript].

Memo: example of relationship that doesn’t click- and the teacher’s recognition that even though it may be more challenging to talk with the family- it is still necessary for the child- and teacher sees that whatever she can do to communicate with the family can help the parent to interact with their child.

[Empathy and understanding that may not click with every personality/parent here influences teacher’s practices with parents- that still working for the child]

**Figure 2** (continued)

corresponding level of the statement’s referent; researcher memos (including synthesis statements and my interpretations of the quote); and the initial emerging codes.

Beneath each statement, I wrote synthesis statements to describe my interpretations of the passage. I wrote memos about what I thought the statement meant and possible implications. I also bracketed out any personal emotions I felt in response to the passage.

This helped me to distinguish my feelings about a statement from what I interpreted the
participant to say. I developed a category for statements that specifically related to partnership. Additionally, I indicated whether or not the participants characterized their relationships with parents in a particular way.

Through the analysis of the initial interviews, I uncovered empathic and critical statements that teachers made. I focused on the empathic statements and how they could be used to build relationships with the children and partnerships with families. Utilizing the empathy analysis template (Figure 2) helped guide the development of the first two themes and the six corresponding subthemes which correspond to the first research question. The first theme was criticism distorts empathy. It had two subthemes: holding a deficit view and placing blame. The second theme was expressing sincere empathy and the subsequent subthemes that emerged were: embracing inclusion as a philosophy, being relaxed and balanced, being responsive to culture, and engaging in meaningful communication with families. In the next section, I will describe how I analyzed and incorporated the follow-up interviews.

**Follow-up Interviews**

A fourth cycle of coding and analysis. After the follow-up interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, I coded each transcript. I thought of this as the fourth cycle of coding and analysis. I used an interview summary sheet to capture initial impressions and analytic memos directly after each interview with participants. I created an electronic table (Figure 3), similar to what I created for the initial interviews, for each of the five participants. Because the follow-up interviews were more focused on clarifying information from the initial interviews and then gaining more information specifically related to empathy and partnership, the coding process was more streamlined than for the initial
N=Nancy; R=Rosie (pseudonym)

N: . . . so how does empathy affect relationships with the child and family?

R: It really does affect everything. I mean I noticed like with the practicum students who come into the classroom and one of them has him as their portfolio child, and they’re like, ‘Oh my gosh he doesn’t do this and that’ and I’m like, ‘Oh but last year, last year he didn’t even do part of those things’ and to know he’s had such a fight all of his life and to work through these things and you just have to keep these things in mind and I know it’s hard but . . .

**Memo:**

Empathy affects everything.

Have to keep things in mind—child’s experience- and understand how his experience affects his life and development.

Empathy helps teachers to understand development and where child is and why he may be doing/ not doing certain things. Important to understand child’s experience and how it may affect him.

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*Figure 3. Follow-up interview passage (coded).*

interviews. I used in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009) and a bold font on the electronic documents to indicate the codes using the participants’ own words and phrases embedded within the transcript. Below each coded passage, I inserted a separate box where I wrote memos and synthesis statements of my interpretation of the participant’s statement. The memos also included possible implications for empathy and/or partnership (see Figure 3). As with the initial interviews, after each day, an electronic file was saved as a new file to show the changes that had been made that day and to track progress.

**A fifth cycle of analysis: putting the picture together.** I compared the new codes and emerging themes from the follow-up interviews to the themes that developed from the initial interviews. To help me gain a big picture view of how the themes from the first
research question and the second research question were related, I created another electronic document, a table of emerging themes (see Figure 4). I thought of this as a fifth cycle of analysis, for which I brought data from both the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews together. A small sample of the third theme, nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature, is included in Figure 4 in development. This figure highlights an example of my work in progress and shows how I used the table of emerging themes as more of a “living

<table>
<thead>
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<th>EMPATHIC STATEMENTS FROM 18 INITIAL INTERVIEWS &amp; 5 FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS</th>
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<td>(a larger theme?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy interconnected:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher empathy leads to a more connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom community: connecting parents and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy helps to build partnerships- “we will always</td>
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<tr>
<td>work together”</td>
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</table>

*Figure 4. Table of emerging themes (sample).*
document” as the themes were emerging. The columns display possible themes, subthemes, and corresponding notes along with supporting examples from interviews. I also used this table to bring together memos and note questions I asked myself during analysis. The bold font indicates codes and quotes from interview passages.

From this encompassing view, I was able to construct the third theme and its three subthemes in response to the second research question and see how it fit together with the first research question and first two themes. The third theme that emerged from the data was nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature. The subthemes were: experience fosters natural empathy, empathy lays a foundation for emotional security and safety, and awareness allows empathy to unfold.

**Validation of Analysis**

A variety of strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness and rigor for both the initial and follow-up interviews and included: triangulation, peer-debriefing, member checking, memo writing, and an audit trail. Triangulation of data was achieved by collecting information from multiple sources (e.g., transcripts, transcript summary sheets, meeting minutes, memos; Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). For the initial interviews, research team members discussed the interviews, interpretations, and research progress during weekly conference calls. Minutes were kept during the conference calls. I reviewed the minutes and the coded interview summary sheets as a way to check my interpretations with those of the researcher who conducted the initial interview.

For both the initial and follow-up interviews, I met weekly with my major professor, who was also one of the principal investigators for the FSD study. A fellow graduate student, who also was involved in the FSD study, regularly joined the meeting as part of the
peer debriefing and triangulation of data process throughout data analysis. I met at various times throughout the year to debrief with another small group of IRB-approved graduate student peers (two others), who were not involved with the FSD project, to discuss the analysis and findings. This helped to bring an outside perspective to the work (Glesne, 2006). One peer was a former teacher who helped me to question my assumptions and thoughts about teachers’ statements. The other peer did not have a background in education, so as I explained my process of coding and analysis, I had an outside perspective that helped me challenge my own thinking. I also had to be explicit and clearly articulate my thoughts behind my decisions. I regularly engaged in memo writing (Maxwell, 2005; Saldaña, 2009) both formal and informal, throughout the analysis process to document and reflect on: the coding process and choices made throughout analysis; how the inquiry process changed and formed; and emerging patterns of codes, concepts, and themes in the data (Saldaña, 2009).

I confirmed my understanding of initial interviews through member checks with participants during follow-up interviews. Participants had a chance to explain, clarify, or make changes to what they said in their initial interviews at the beginning of the follow-up interviews. A second member check (Glesne, 2006) was done with participants involved in follow-up interviews. I e-mailed a final theme summary (see Appendix M) to participants to allow them to review, comment, and further clarify my interpretations. Three out of five participants responded to my final member check.

All three of the participants indicated that my interpretations were accurate. One participant did not have any additions to make. The second teacher highlighted her belief that “true empathy comes from within” and reiterated that when teachers connect with children and families empathically, “the true magic happens.” She thoughtfully emphasized,
“When a child and his/her family feels that you not only understand them but genuinely care for them as a person and are there to support them through their journey all things are possible.” The third participant included the insightful addition that she observed children learning empathy from each other. The teacher specifically noted that children with disabilities brought out the best in the other children. Children were able to share strategies and help each other when they were struggling. Children learning empathy from each other was an area that may have surfaced more apparently during observations, but certainly adds to the understanding of how empathy is fostered and nurtured within the classroom. In an effort to reciprocate and show my appreciation for the participants who took part in follow-up interviews, I offered to send a copy of my dissertation to those who were interested.

An audit trail was kept through the coding and analysis process by saving each day’s electronic work (e.g., codebook, interview coding documents, memos) as a “new file” including the date in the file name. This way, I could keep track of changes made each day and show not only how my thought process was evolving, but also how the data transitioned from raw data to codes, categories, and then themes. I wrote a running memo of the process, which I also saved and dated to follow the process and allow others to see my thought process as well.

**Ethical Considerations**

In this section, I describe how I addressed some anticipated ethical issues throughout the research. Specifically included are: confidentiality, informed consent, and reciprocity (Glesne, 2006). Confidentiality was addressed by indicating in the participant consent forms that participants’ real names would not be revealed. Pseudonyms were used whenever
participants are referred to and any particular identifying information of participants (or persons who participants referenced in their interviews) was withheld or changed.

Informed consent was addressed through the use of consent forms. Participants were asked to sign consent forms prior to their participation in the initial interviews. The consent forms were thoroughly explained and included an explanation of the purpose of the research and any risks or benefits that participants might experience. Participants were informed that their involvement was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time during the interview. When a phone interview for initial interviews was conducted, the participants either (a) were read the consent form over the phone and the researcher conducting the interview indicated that the participant gave verbal consent or (b) were mailed a copy of the consent form prior to the interview to sign and return with a postage paid envelope and were further informed once contacted for the interview. In both instances, researchers gave time for the participants to ask questions before signing or giving verbal confirmation over the phone before the interview began.

With regard to the follow-up interviews, I asked participants if they would be willing to clarify information from the first interview and answer a few follow-up questions. Participants were informed that they might end the interview at any time and they could choose not answer any questions if they did not feel comfortable. A new consent form was not required by my university’s IRB because the initial consent form included information regarding a follow-up interview.

Reciprocity was addressed during the initial interview through a small honorarium consisting of a $25 gift card. It was given directly to participants after the face-to-face interviews or mailed to participants after the phone interviews were completed. After the
follow-up interviews were conducted, I mailed participants a small gift consisting of three books for their preschool classrooms as a way to show my appreciation for their time and effort and also offered to e-mail a copy of the final dissertation.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study: a lack of diversity among participants, a lack of observational data, and the lapse of time between initial and follow-up interviews. The first limitation to the research is the lack of diversity in early childhood practitioners. We recruited teachers who taught in inclusive early childhood settings. Despite efforts to recruit participants of diverse characteristics, most practitioners in special education tend to be Caucasian and from a middle income socioeconomic status (Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). It is possible that participants of varying income status or ethnicities not represented in these findings may have other perspectives and experiences regarding empathy and partnership with families. The purpose of this research was not to generalize the findings to other situations but to represent the perspectives of the participants involved in interviews.

A second limitation to the research is a lack of observational data in the form of prolonged engagement. Part of expressing empathy is the nonverbal behaviors that one displays. It is a look, it is matching another person’s affect, a nod of the head, a pat on the back, and through interviews those exchanges that occur in the classroom are missed. Many may not even realize that they do these things. With infants for example, empathy can been seen when they match another’s cry or give a toy to a friend who is sad to help him or her feel better. A limitation of this research is that I did not witness empathic exchanges between the teachers and parents, teachers and children, or between children. A great deal of
observational data could be gathered from witnessing a teacher interacting with children and parents. Observing those examples of empathy in the classrooms would enrich and build upon this research. As Goleman (1995) stated, “People’s emotions are rarely put into words; far more often they are expressed through other cues. The key to intuiting another’s feelings is in the ability to read nonverbal channels: tone of voice, gesture, facial expression, and the like” (p. 96), and in retrospect, it would have added another dimension to the study had I done participant observations.

The initial interviews were conducted before I was at the point in my program of study when I knew specifically on what I would focus. Additionally, observations were outside of the scope of the larger FSD project at the time, and as such, they were not conducted at the time of the initial interviews. When the time came to conduct the follow-up interviews, conducting participant observations was not feasible.

A third limitation to the research is the time lapse that occurred between the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews. Approximately one and a half to two years lapsed between the interviews. It is possible that, within that time span, teachers could have grown and changed in their teaching styles, methods, and opinions. A few of the teachers, however, made comments during the follow-up interviews that supported their initial statements. As I was completing member checks with them, repeating portions of their initial interviews, and asking for clarifications, they said that it was interesting to hear and be reminded of what they said in the previous interview, because they still say the same things today.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Yet, taught by time, my heart has learned to glow
for other’s good, and melt at other’s woe.

Homer

Introduction

The focus of this research was twofold. In the initial interviews, I sought to understand, through my interpretative lens, in what ways teachers express empathy and what empathy meant for partnerships between teachers and parents. The follow-up interviews were focused on understanding what teachers’ perceptions were regarding empathy and empathy’s role in partnerships. The two specific research questions of the study were:

1. In what ways do teachers express empathy in their relationships with young children and families?

2. What are preschool teachers’ perceptions of empathy in the parent–teacher partnership?

Analyzing across both the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews, I identified three major themes with nine subthemes. The first two major themes address the first research question with data gathered from the initial interviews. Those themes are entitled: *criticism distorts empathy* and *expressing sincere empathy*. The third major theme, *nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature* addressed the second research question of how teachers perceive empathy in partnerships with data gathered from follow-up interviews. These findings, which I presented in Chapter 3, are reviewed in Figure 5. In this chapter, I discuss the findings according to research questions. In each section, I describe the data and discuss the findings that emerged from the data in greater detail.
Research Question 1: In What Ways Do Teachers Express Empathy in Their Relationships with Young Children and Families?

Initial Interviews

During the analysis of the initial interviews, statements of empathy and statements of criticism or judgment began to emerge from the teachers’ interviews. Statements I interpreted as empathic were based on the definition I described in Chapter 1. Empathy, in this study within the context of early care and education, has four components. It is the ability for the teacher to: (a) feel what the child or parent is feeling, (b) understand what the
child or parent is feeling, (c) communicate that understanding to them, and (d) and then respond in a way that helps to meet their needs.

I went back to the Encarta Dictionary (n.d.) to clarify the definitions of critical and judgmental. The two main definitions for “critical” included: (a) “not approving—tending to find fault with somebody or something, or with people and things in general” and (b) “giving comments or judgments—containing or involving comments and opinions that analyze or judge something, especially in a detailed way.” The definition for judgmental included: “tending to judge or criticize the conduct of other people.”

**Teachers’ Expressions of Empathy: Critical or Sincere?**

Two major themes were identified that addressed how preschool teachers expressed empathy in their relationships with children and families. The first theme, criticism distorts empathy, interprets the statements of teachers that were identified as primarily critical in nature. The second theme, expressing sincere empathy, interprets the statements of teachers that were identified as primarily empathic in nature. For both of these themes, I examined and interpreted the language used, behavior described, and values expressed from the teachers’ statements and what meaning it held for empathy or criticism as related to their partnerships with parents.

Teacher statements varied in being empathic and critical in nature as did their focus on the levels of child, family, and culture. There were two teachers who expressed only critical comments. There were six teachers who made both empathic statements and critical statements. Ten teachers made only empathic statements. Of the 10 whose statements were purely empathic, I included how they characterized their relationships with parents and the richness of the interview when considering who to invite for a follow-up interview.
Therefore, six of the participants met the criteria for a follow-up interview. As I described in Chapter 3, if a teacher made even one critical statement, I did not invite her for a follow-up interview. I conducted a follow-up interview only with teachers who expressed empathic statements. Teachers also varied in how they described their partnerships or relationships with parents and families. Although some teachers did not characterize their relationships with parents (or were not asked), others did. I invited only those who described their relationships with families as predominantly positive for a follow-up interview. The data represented in the first two themes were predominantly from the initial interviews, however, I asked for clarifications or more examples during the follow-up interviews. In those instances, information was included in the first two themes.

**Theme 1: Criticism Distorts Empathy**

The first major theme examined and interpreted the words and views of teachers who were primarily critical in expressing empathy and included two subthemes: holding a deficit view of children and families and placing blame on the child or parent. I provide quotations from the interviews to give examples of critical statements and the meaning it held for partnerships with parents.

The two subthemes, holding a deficit view and placing blame on the child, family, and/or family’s culture, often overlapped. For example, if a teacher’s statement reflected holding a deficit view, it often had to do with placing blame on the parent (or child or culture). I considered them to be distinct concepts however, because a statement could be seen as taking a deficit perspective without necessarily placing blame. There were times when I perceived both subthemes, but one subtheme was more overt and one more subtle. For instance, a deficit view might have been more evident and blame was inferred, but not
overtly stated and vice versa. In the following section I discuss each subtheme in more detail.

**Holding a deficit view.** Statements that more overtly focused on holding a deficit view of children and families highlighted what teachers’ perceived as faults or shortcomings and that criticized the child, the family, and/or the cultural practice. The deficit view can be seen in opposition to a strengths view, for which the focus is on building from the positives, the strengths, or what is working well for the child, family, or culture. In other words, the statements that reflected a deficit perspective were not focused on the strengths; rather, they highlighted what was lacking or missing in the child, family, or culture from the teacher’s view. Statements that reflected holding a deficit view expressed the perceived negative aspects of the situation or person.

The following example highlights a teacher holding a deficit view with undertones of placing blame at the level of the family. A preschool/home intervention teacher stated,

The only thing . . . I guess there’s a couple families that are more of the English learner families, or some of the lower income families that may not interact that much with their kids anyways. So there’s just not a whole lot of stimulation within the environment.

This teacher’s perception of these particular families’ deficits—having a low socioeconomic status or the status as an English language learner—suggests that the “statuses” are reasons the families fail to interact with their children. Another example of a teacher who expressed a deficit view particularly in regard to families with many children stated,

Some of my families that are very involved with their children and you can tell that in school. They do know how to make choices and verbalize their choices compared to
some families where it’s a large family and they may not give attention to their children, you might see that they might have a harder time with some of those things. So, when they come to school they need to be taught how to self-regulate or how to make a choice because they didn’t have the opportunity at home. They either didn’t have the toy or they might not have very much at home so when they’re given all these choices, they don’t know to make the choice because they move from thing to thing to thing and they think they might never see it again. We do have some of that as well, where they’ve never been exposed to these things, like, “Oh my goodness there’s books? I’ve never had a book before. I can look at a book?” So, some of that as well. So, not only do I have different cultures, but different economic cultures in our district as well.

This statement predominantly holds a deficit view with undertones of blame focused on what the families were not doing or were unable to provide financially. The statement does not focus on trying to understand the families’ experiences—what it might be like to raise a child in poverty or to live in poverty—rather it is focused on what was lacking. The behavior of the children also was viewed in a negative light, jumping from toy to toy, as opposed to being seen as interested or excited.

Holding such deficit views is in opposition to a strengths view. A teacher holding a strengths view might see the same situation from a different angle and talk about the benefits for a child to grow up learning multiple languages or the benefit to having many siblings at home. A teacher holding a strengths view might say, “How can we build from what is positive in this family?” Moreover, a teacher who expresses sincere empathy may try to make empathic inferences about the experience of the family member such as: “It
must be difficult to be an adult trying to learn a new language,” or “maybe the family is nervous that I’m judging them when I’m there so they don’t know what to do,” or “maybe they think it’s rude to speak in a language I don’t understand in front of me,” or “it must be really stressful struggling to make ends meet for a large family.”

**Placing blame.** Placing blame was more overt in some statements expressed by teachers. Here, the teachers’ statements often focused on the attribution of blame: a perceived failure to do, to act, or to provide on the part of parent (child or culture). The statements often highlighted the teachers’ perceptions of things that were not being done, but that she thought should be done. These statements could be seen as attributing blame on all three levels, that of the child, family, and culture.

The following two passages highlight overlapping components of a deficit view and placing blame on the level of the family. When talking about the families she works with, one home intervention/preschool teacher said,

And then some parents, this sounds bad, but kind of talk the talk, “Oh yeah, I’m going to do that” but then don’t ever follow through. Those are the kids that don’t make the progress that we’d like to see.

Another classroom teacher echoed the same sentiment, stating, “So often our problem with parents is follow through. You know, I can give them all the ideas, but if they don’t follow through and they are not consistent, none of it is going to work.” These statements reflect both holding a deficit view and placing blame on the parents for their child’s lack of progress. These statements reflect a deficit view, as the overall tone of the statements highlight from a negative perspective what the parents have failed to do. In the teachers’ view, the parents have neglected to follow through with their recommendations and, thus, the
parents are blamed because their children are not progressing at the rate that the teachers would like or expect. The teachers do not, however, indicate what the parents’ (or children’s) strengths are or make empathic inferences about what the parents’ may be experiencing or what else might be going on in their lives that might interfere with “following through.”

Other statements took a deficit view and placed blame on the level of the family’s cultural practices. One classroom teacher described a situation in which children from outside the mainstream culture (she did not disclose the families’ cultures of origin) are having trouble focusing on one task at a time. She said,

And I think sometimes some of the cultures too, where [the families] come from and what [the children] are expected to do at home. There is that, “I need to move to move to move from thing to thing” you know, and [the children] are never requested to do anything, [the children] never ask [me permission] to do anything. And that affects how they do things at school as well.

This quote references the contrast between a parent’s expectation in the home and the teacher’s expectation in the classroom and how the teacher sees it playing out in the classroom. The teacher was placing blame on parents and their culture for not requesting their children to “do anything.” A deficit view was attributed to this passage because she is not taking a strengths view or positive look at what the cultural backgrounds of the children could contribute. Instead, the children were seen as unable to focus and impolite rather than as excited or interested in all the toys and activities in the class.

Another teacher’s statement reflects observations of both family and culture where blame and a deficit view are attributed to both levels. She stated,
I tell you what I find in cultural difference is what parents expect of their child. In some cultures, there will be a three year old being carried everywhere by the parent. Therefore it does carry over in what we expect from them. So that is the situation where we have to get [the children] in the group where they’re seeing what their peers are doing. And I hate to say, but making them blend and trying to get them to not stick out at school . . . and you know this is the situation where we do not get directions when we have those babies—they don’t come with a book to tell us how to do it. And that’s where I think we could solve so many problems if we had good parenting classes because parents don’t know what their child can do and you’ll have middle class people that will come in and go, “I had no idea they could do that.” I have people that come in here putting their coats on their child and zipping it up for them. You don’t need to do that; they need to be doing that on their own. We have cultures where they feed their child until much later than usual.

This teacher was viewing the situation from the perspective of the mainstream culture in the United States, where independence is prized and children should do as much as they can on their own. She points out deficits in other cultural practices in their lesser expectations of the children. She indicated that families who are part of those cultures do too much for their children. Essentially, this teacher blames the parents and their cultural practices for making the children “stick out at school” and for causing issues for the children within the classroom by falling short of her expectations.

This teacher believes that a good parenting class (presumably inspired by Western/U.S. practices and values) would fix a lot of issues and inspire parents to conform to practices she sees as appropriate for children. However, she does not express an
understanding that, from a parent’s perspective, interdependence may be a cultural value and practice. Doing things for a child, like zipping a coat or feeding them, may be how a parent shows they are providing for and caring for the child. She may not be aware that some cultures see it as their duty to feed their children until they are older.

An empathic teacher may infer possible reasons for a parent’s actions. Perhaps parents who are carrying their 3 year old everywhere are relishing the days “their baby” can still be carried—before they are too big to be carried any longer; or maybe they are just in a hurry and little legs cannot always keep pace with an adult’s stride. Maybe the parent is trying to prevent a drop-off or pick-up meltdown and so pre-emptively avoids it by helping the child dress or undress. There are many possibilities and ways to empathize with families and their cultural practices, but they need to begin with an understanding of the families’ experiences.

**What criticism distorts empathy means for partnerships.** Not all of the teachers interviewed during the initial interviews characterized their partnerships with parents. Teachers were asked, “What does a successful partnership with parents look like to you?” and “What, specifically, do you do that you think helps to foster partnerships with parents?” Often, the topic of the quality of the partnerships came up during the interviews, but not in every interview. This meant there were some teachers who made critical statements, but did not characterize or describe their relationships with parents whereas other teachers did describe their partnerships with parents. However, teachers’ statements often expressed overtly or alluded to dissatisfaction with their relationships and/or a desire to have better partnerships. Many times, the dissatisfaction was expressed regarding a lack of communication with parents.
One teacher who discussed her relationships with parents indicated a desire for more communication. She said,

I would like my parents and I to converse more. . . . So, if it’s important, please write in the journal. I try to write notes to them and let them know how their child’s day goes and what we are going to be talking about that week. But what I’ve found is that I don’t think my parents are reading the journal and the only time I get them to really communicate with me is if there is a problem.

Later in the interview, she went on to say, “I have a hard time getting parent volunteers and parents to come in. I usually have to rely on the other teachers to grab their parents.” She stresses this point and stated again, “I never can get parent volunteers. . . . I can’t even get my parents to come in.” In the first statement there is an implied dissatisfaction in the parent–teacher partnership and level of communication. The teacher indicates a desire for more regular, consistent communication but only describes one way for parents to communicate—the journal. In the following statements, she seems to feel some level of responsibility or frustration for not being able to get parents to come in and spend time in the classroom. Yet, she does not make any further inferences or surmise why parents do not or are not able to come in to her classroom.

Another teacher describes her interactions with parents and implies her dissatisfaction in those interactions when dismissing her students at the end of the day. She said,

It’s easier for us to recognize [the parents] and be like, “Okay, you can go.” Don’t usually have time to make eye contact with them, I mean, sometimes it’s like, “Hey,” but most of them, even if I am right there, just take their kid and leave.
Volunteering time in the classroom represents one aspect of partnership or one way that parents can be involved in the classroom. To this teacher, however, it seems to represent a large component of partnerships, and her statement reflects the state of her partnerships with parents as she sees it. Her quote indicates a complete lack of communication between the teacher and the parents. The teacher reveals that she does not even have time to make eye contact, let alone have a conversation with parents.

**Conclusion.** Holding a deficit view and placing blame are two overlapping subthemes to the first theme, criticism distorts empathy. Many of the teachers whose statements were critical also made some form of empathic statements. However, the statements that reflected a negative, deficit view and/or blamed the child, family, and/or culture overshadowed the empathic and did not help to support the partnerships between teachers and parents. The criticism and judgment gives a grim picture not only of empathy, but also of partnerships.

Certainly, there are other factors at play in these parent–teacher partnerships in addition to the critical statements teachers made regarding families. Time in the daily schedule, teachers feeling overworked, and parents working outside of the home are just a few possibilities that may negatively affect a parent–teacher partnership. Empathy seems to be one piece of the partnership puzzle. However, as will be seen in the other themes, teachers who also have families who work do not report the same trouble in getting parent volunteers.

The distorted view can be seen in contrast to the next theme, expressing sincere empathy, which created a clearer picture of what I interpreted as the teachers’ intent to
understand, feel, communicate, and respond to the needs of the children or family members. I will describe this theme and its subthemes in the following section.

**Theme 2: Expressing Sincere Empathy**

The second theme that emerged in response to the first research question, expressing sincere empathy, captures the unique behaviors and dispositions of how teachers conveyed empathy and the meaning it had for partnerships with parents. In the following discussion I describe this theme and provide examples of how I interpreted the statements to express empathy in an authentic way. The four subthemes that emerged are: embracing inclusion as a philosophy; being relaxed and balanced; being responsive to culture, and engaging in meaningful communication with families. Finally, I discuss how this theme relates to partnerships with parents.

I interpreted statements of sincere empathy as expressions that were not clouded or distorted by criticism or judgment. The statements reflected a pure, authentic intent to understand (or attempt to understand) and/or share the feelings of a child, family members, and/or their cultural practices. In many cases, there was also an element of response—where teachers described how they responded or communicated their understanding of the experience or emotion to the child or family member.

**Embracing inclusion as a philosophy.** The subtheme of embracing inclusion as a philosophy refers to the teachers’ philosophy of inclusion of all—not only children with disabilities, not only children of diverse ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds; teachers manifested their empathy by embracing and including everyone who comes into their classrooms. Inclusion extended to parents, siblings, grandparents, teacher assistants, substitute teachers, building administrators, and all others who came to the classroom,
whether they were visiting for only a day or they were regular fixtures in the school.

Teachers tried to create a welcoming atmosphere for everyone.

Teachers who embraced inclusion as a philosophy were not only accepting of differences of all types, they celebrated them. They created an overall sense of community in their classroom that extended beyond their classroom walls. They were nonjudgmental and held a view of a bigger picture of children and families. They were looking ahead to the children’s future and wanted to prepare them for life beyond the classroom, wanting to help them feel comfortable with differences and to learn how to be accepting of others. One teacher spoke about her willingness to include the families and how it can build relationships. She said,

We accept the whole family. Anybody. . . It’s also important to learn about their families. I know all of the siblings’ names, you know, things like that to build that relationship and that rapport. And again, once you have that rapport and they know that you’re open and willing to communicate . . . it’s about us working together.

In addition to what I interpreted on the levels of child, family, and culture from the initial interviews, one teacher expanded my thinking beyond those to include the wider classroom community during a follow-up interview. She stated,

I think it also helps with our classroom structure that you have to be really empathetic to all the other people that come in our classroom. I co-teach and we have a floater teacher that is in a lot. So, something else I try to do is to not make it too much of my room . . . I refer to it as our room. “Well this is what we’re doing.” . . . Something I try to do too, is try to let my co-teacher have a lot of involvement and feel like it’s her room. She gets to structure things and have a lot of say. When our administrator
comes into the room, we make sure to introduce her to the kids, not formally but say, “Hey, Fran is here!” Or something like that. . . if I’m helping other people feel like it’s their classroom and feel like they have a say in it then I really feel like we have a community and I want to get to work and I want to get to see people and I want to find out what people are doing over the weekend, kids, teachers, parents, and it just . . . you want it to be something you enjoy doing if you have to do it 40 hours a week plus some, so you build it up.

In both of these examples, teachers are addressing the importance of being inclusive and how that is a part of what they believe about building relationships, not only with children, not only with families, but with the greater school community and beyond. Teachers were able to take the perspectives of the children, families, and community members and act in a way that is welcoming. It helped to build the partnerships with parents and relationships with other staff and community members.

**Being relaxed and balanced.** Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were responsive to the needs of children and families in a relaxed and balanced way. They shared the feelings of and understood the overwhelmed parent who was rushing around in the morning to get to work on time and so they tied their child’s shoes for them instead of letting their child do it. They shared personal stories of parenthood and gave out home phone numbers because it helped to bring down the professional barriers. Teachers thought those were some reasons parents trusted them and were willing to partner with them. Being relaxed and balanced meant that there was an ease to partnerships. Teachers perceived that parents felt understood by them; teachers, thus, felt connected to families.
Teachers who expressed sincere empathy in their statements described a relaxed and balanced perspective. This was evident in their approach to partnership and in how they tried to meet the needs of both the children and the parents. Being relaxed and balanced meant that teachers often took a live-and-let-live approach to partnerships. In this example, the teacher discussed how she did not spend a lot of time telling parents how they should parent. Instead, when asked her opinion, she provided information or suggestions, but mostly, she left it to them. She had a fine line between offering suggestions and extending herself into family’s lives, uninvited:

I give advice when parents ask for it and I certainly provide parents with reading material . . . and those parents who want to come to parent night, come to parents’ nights. We certainly do a [program name] one on one and do what I’m doing with you now, “Here’s an explanation of the classroom and how it works,” and we go through some material and I give a lesson or two . . . so they understand that format. But, generally, I don’t do a lot of home-based intervention.

Many teachers felt they were there primarily to listen to parents; they offered advice only when asked. When parents asked for suggestions, teachers were happy to problem solve with parents and discuss the strategies that were successful or unsuccessful in the classroom. Teachers also helped families come up with new solutions. The key, however, was listening.

My husband has a great saying: “God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.” Listen more than you talk. I think as a teacher, whether working with students or the parents, just being an open ear and being able to listen to them and see what their needs and concerns are . . . listen to them first before you even say anything.
Teachers who expressed sincere empathy in a relaxed and balanced manner did not try to push a particular agenda or force their opinions onto parents. Rather, they treated parents as capable decision makers who knew their child’s strengths and needs but may have needed support at times. Teachers also tried to balance being seen strictly as a professional by bringing elements of friendship into the relationship. Some teachers thought that an overly professional attitude was a deterrent to some families, that it made the teachers seem unapproachable. One teacher said, “I think sometimes parents are fearful of the professional, but if you can be the friend also.” She thought that some parents may be intimidated because teachers are the professional, but adding elements of friendship can help parents put their guard down.

Some teachers balanced the professional role by offering home phone numbers in the hope that parents would see how invested they are in building relationships—both with the children and with the parents. The following quote emphasized the relationships the teacher built with her students and their parents, in part because she was relaxed in her approach to partnering. Giving her phone number to parents was one way that she balanced the professional role with friendship.

I have been fortunate to do some really amazing things with my students because the rapport I have had with them and their parents. And I always say at the beginning of the year, “I am the teacher, but there is no ‘I’ in team, we will always work together.” I always say I’m one of those crazy teachers that give out my home phone number. They say, “Why would you do that?” Because if there is anything you ever need, we are working together. It’s about us working together to move forward.
Other teachers told their own stories to parents and children as a way to balance the professional role. One teacher mentioned, “Sometimes I share personal experiences that I can say from my standpoint of being a mom.” This allowed some families to open up and begin to build trust with the teacher. Still other teachers offered to meet families after hours as a way to accommodate families’ work schedules. One teacher described the importance of being relaxed about meeting times or activities, saying that it built relationships. She said,

I think that just the more that you can include parents in the activities and experiences that their child is having, the better. And if it has to be things that happen at night, or if you have to make accommodations for working families, then it pays to do so because the reward of the relationship that you have in the end is so great.

**Being responsive to culture.** Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were also accepting of and responsive to a family’s culture. Being responsive to culture meant that teachers incorporated families’ cultural practices and ideas into lessons and were able to share the feelings of the families. Teachers shared the joy and the pride families described when they were able to express their cultural practices in their children’s class. Sharing these feelings built relationships between parents and teachers. From these exchanges and interactions, teachers perceived parents would be more likely to trust them with personal information and then partner with them again in the future. This applied not only to discussions around positive feedback about their children, but teachers also felt that parents would open up to them about problems their child was having at home or at school. Teachers perceived a trusting relationship with parents and from that teachers and parents would work together to figure out ways to help the child or family.
The following quote describes a project a teacher did with her students and the response she received when she welcomed and incorporated the tradition into the class. It also represents an example of empathic happiness on the part of the teacher whereby she describes her joy in sharing the feelings of the family.

This is one of the best years for me because we actually did another holiday which I’ve never had. We did Ramadan. The parents were absolutely, I can’t even tell you how prideful, how happy they were that their culture was being expressed. One of my children, the father just said to me today, “I can’t even thank you enough,” he said, “to tell you how much it means . . . because I want him [his son] to learn that there is a whole world out there and yet still remain in that cultural background that we have.” So, we did Ramadan, which bases itself around the phases of the moon because it’s a whole month-long Muslim holiday. We did an art project of each of the phases of the moon on beautiful black poster board with a gold paint and then we drew the moon with chalk, which is easy for them at this age being that it’s a circle and they’re very familiar with that . . . and then after that we painted the different crescents as it gets bigger up until the full moon with gold paint. So it really stuck out and we hung it around the room.

Teachers respected families’ preferences by, at times, abstaining from their typical teaching practice while still trying to make sure the child felt included. One teacher described a situation with a child in her class and how she perceived she was honoring the parents’ beliefs. She said,

This year I had a boy who did not celebrate Halloween at all and his mom did not want him involved in any kind of Halloween celebration. Our Halloween celebration
was on an early out day where we had parent involvement and called it a Fall Festival. Yes, they got to wear costumes, but because of that I was very cognizant to not read any books that had anything to do with Halloween before that day. I read fall type books, but did not read anything specifically for that in honoring their parents’ beliefs.

Another teacher talked about how she empathized with and responded to a father’s request to spend a few days in the class with his daughter. She displayed an understanding of child and parent needs and also how she responded to the cultural practices of the family. She said, We had a child at the beginning of the school year who had just moved here from China and that culture experience was a lot for her to take on. I think it was a lot for the whole family. Dad said, “What we do is we’re with the child for the first three days of school. So we want to be here from beginning to end.” You have to respect that because you want the child to be successful. But obviously it’s something that they both needed. I think he ended up staying for like 5 days. It was working on the individual level of what everyone needs.

Teachers talked about how they might handle situations in which a difference in culture may clash with the classroom practices. The following two quotations sum up how many teachers who made empathic statements felt about responding to and incorporating family cultures into the classroom. They stated,

I think you need to be really responsive to the different cultures that families have. Just ask a lot of questions, just let them guide you and lead you and be respectful of what they value and what they consider important for their child. If there is a difference, then try and work as a team to figure out how you can meet in the middle
somewhere or embrace their culture and still do what needs to be done to help the child be successful.

and,

Even culture makes a huge difference. Things that [children] celebrate, traditions . . . but I think it enriches the program. A big variety of things and ideas . . . the knowledge that [children] have has come from the customs and beliefs at home and [children] bring it into the classroom. We embrace it, we discuss it, and it might even lead to a lesson.

**Engaging in meaningful communication with families.** Empathic teachers used many different methods to communicate with families. They used e-mail, wrote multiple newsletters home, made phone calls, wrote handwritten notes, and spoke with parents—in-person, before and after school. Many teachers, including the teachers whose criticism distorted their empathy, used a variety of methods, such as the ones listed above, to communicate with parents. The difference and the key to more successful partnerships between parents and teachers who expressed sincere empathy and those whose criticism distorts empathy, was the quality of the communication and the interactions between teachers and parents. Teachers who were engaging in meaningful communication with families also described more success in their partnerships. For these teachers, empathy was a tool they used to inform how they responded to families.

One of the most powerful methods of informing empathy was going on a home visit. Many teachers whose statements were empathic went on home visits prior to the start of the school year. This served multiple purposes: the children were able to meet their teacher in their own comfortable environment, in the safety of having their parents there; the children
were able to show their teachers their bedrooms, their favorite games, and toys, thus giving the teachers a greater sense of the children’s experiences at home; and parents were able to have private conversations with the teachers to talk about any concerns they might have or just get to know the teacher better.

One teacher described a situation in which a child in her class was quite shy in the classroom. Once the teacher went to her house after the start of the school year, the child opened up and the teacher was able to see her in a new light—one that she had not seen in the classroom. The teacher said,

They had moved from [another state], so they were bringing out all the photo albums and the artwork she had made and we were going through all of that and I was like, “Look at how much people will share when they are in their own environment!”

Which you know, we think of the center as being our second home, so we think everyone else is home here, but then you go over [to their home] and you’re like, “Okay, this is your comfort level, now I see it.”

One teacher talked about one of the possible pitfalls to the home visit: parents feeling that they would be judged by the teachers. This teacher talked about how she and her colleagues addressed that to ease parents’ minds. She stated,

I think that some of them really appreciated it and love it and were so excited, and both parents would be there, they took off work, the mom stayed home and the dad took off work so he was there too. . . . We worked our schedules out so that we could have some night times because some parents can’t do it during the day and our principal and superintendent supported that. I came in at noon one day and worked at night so that I could get them at night time instead of having them take off work to do
this. . . Some, I think loved it and some, I think, were very worried about it and it was like, “We are not there,” we had to bring it up, “I am not here to judge your home.” We talked about that and we wrote it in the note that it is not to judge you or things like that . . . this is a relationship that we want to have, something that we want to do.

She acknowledged that some families were very worried about potential judgment, a barrier to partnership, and so she addressed it from the beginning. This teacher felt that the home visit was one way to foster the partnership from the very beginning of the school year. She made empathic inferences in that she understood and responded to the potential worries of parents regarding criticism and judgment from teachers. Another teacher talked about the home visit as a way to begin a friendly relationship and share with families who they are as well. This echoed the need to balance the professional and personal relationship in the being relaxed and balanced subtheme. I asked her, “Do you think being in a family’s home helps you understand a family’s experience a little more?” She responded,

Oh definitely. Then you will know if this a family who has only one child or more than one and that will affect the way that the child acts in the classroom. It almost opens the door of friendliness and it’s the beginning, opening the door and it’s always been a really pleasant experience and the children love it and want to show us their room and share this is who I am and sharing that with us and we share a piece of us with them.

Finally, this teacher also talked about how informative home visits can be. There is a lot of information one can acquire from doing a home visit, that a teacher might not be able to get any other way. She said,
So I will go to every student’s home and show the parents some activities to do at home with their kids and just get to know the families. Just see what life is like with their families, I mean, it can tell you a lot—just stepping in the home of the families—about their child.

The home visit was an especially powerful tool in aiding teachers in their ability to make empathic inferences with families. It provided information about the child, the family, the dynamics, and cultural practices that personalized the experience for the teachers in a way that no other form of communication could. Communication with families in a meaningful way, particularly in the form of the home visit, informed teachers’ empathic responses to children and families in the classroom. It also allowed the families to see the teacher outside of the classroom and begin a relationship in a less formal way. In many cases, it was also the first step to parents trusting the teachers and building partnerships with the child and the family.

**Conclusion.** Expressing sincere empathy was the second theme that emerged in response to the first research question of how teachers expressed empathy in their partnerships with parents. It had four subthemes: embracing inclusion as a philosophy, being relaxed and balanced, being responsive to culture, and engaging in meaningful communication with families. The teachers’ ability to empathize with children and families was evident in how they responded to the needs of the children and families. Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were inclusive, displayed a relaxed and balanced approach to teaching, were responsive to families’ cultures, and engaged in meaningful communication with families. The teachers’ ability to make empathic inferences about how children and families felt was a powerful tool to inform the way they responded to meet the needs of
children and families. Teachers who expressed sincere empathy and who also characterized their relationships with families described their relationships as positive. Empathy was the key factor between teachers who made critical comments and those who were sincerely empathic.

Research Question 2: What Are Preschool Teachers’ Perceptions of Empathy in the Parent–Teacher Partnership?

Follow-up Interviews

The first research question addressed the teachers’ expressions of empathy and how one can understand empathy in their experiences of teaching. With the second research question I wanted to understand what the teachers thought about empathy and how it affected their partnerships with families. The data that were analyzed and the resulting findings will be discussed in the following sections.

Theme 3: Nurturing Empathy’s Interconnected Nature

The third theme, nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature, is discussed in the following section and focuses on the teachers’ perceptions of their experiences with empathy. A sense of interrelatedness or overlap between the subthemes emerged from the follow-up interviews. The concepts of nature and nurture, parents’ responses to teachers’ expressions of empathy, and the teachers’ awareness of their own empathy were interwoven in this theme. Three subthemes emerged in response to the second research question of teachers’ perceptions of empathy. The first subtheme is experience fosters natural empathy, which details how teachers’ perceptions revolved around their understanding of their own empathy development. The second subtheme, empathy lays a foundation for emotional security and safety, relates to how teachers think empathy affected their relationships with children and
families. The third subtheme of teachers’ perceptions of empathy is awareness allows empathy to unfold, which examines teachers’ awareness of their empathic inferences and their ability to see empathy playing out in their teaching practice. I discuss each of the themes in greater detail below.

**Experience fosters natural empathy.** The first subtheme represents the interconnectedness of nature and nurture one sees in the field of human development. When I asked the teachers in their follow-up interviews, “What, specifically, helped you to develop empathy for the children, families, and their cultural practices?” every teacher responded in one way or another that being empathic was “just part of my nature.” One teacher summed up the sentiment, “I guess it’s part of who I am.” Being able to empathize with or make empathic inferences about the feelings of the children and families with whom they work came naturally to this group of teachers.

Discussing the innate quality of empathy also brought teachers to talk about their personal views on teaching. Most thought that empathy and teaching went hand-in-hand. One teacher commented, “A teacher has to be empathetic. If you’re not empathetic and willing to work and try new things, then you are in the wrong profession.” The teachers’ focus on the essential nature of their empathic capacity speaks to its importance in education and teaching and to life outside the classroom. The same teacher went on to say, “Empathy is extremely important in teaching and in life.”

During data analysis, as this theme of experience fosters natural empathy began to emerge, I questioned and reflected on the statements teachers made that fell under the criticism distorts empathy theme I discussed earlier. If the teachers included in the follow-up interviews thought of themselves as naturally empathic, then why did some teachers express
statements that were critical or judgmental of children, families, and/or cultural practices in the initial interviews and others did not? One possibility is the nurture influence.

The interplay of experience—both personal experiences and the wisdom that comes with time—fostered and informed teachers’ natural empathic tendencies. A few teachers talked about their experiences being a parent. They understood first-hand how difficult parenting could be and were able to take the perspective of the parents of children in their class. Another teacher attributed her ability to empathize to how her parents raised her. “I think that it was that I was brought up in a different kind of culture, so I think it is in my background.” Yet another teacher reflected, “I think that partially [empathy] is just in [my] nature; I think that you can definitely nurture it.” One teacher indicated that a combination of her experiences as a parent and her experience in how she was raised helps her capacity to make empathic inferences with parents who have children with disabilities in her class. She said,

I think it helps that I am a parent myself. But I also think it probably goes back to my upbringing . . . but imagining how hard it would be, it is so important to empathize with them and not judge them.

One teacher commented that she felt responding empathically was part of a teacher’s nature and also developed over time,

I just think these things come with time . . . the development with being in the classroom and [I] also think that other things are innate. Because some teachers will say, “How do you know to do that?” or [they] want training. As new teachers come around, they want to look up in some kind of book. . . . Not everything comes from a
book. . . . Some things are just innate within a teacher and you have certain ways of just knowing what to do.

This quote highlights the teacher’s natural tendencies toward empathy but also how experience has played a part in how she has developed ways to respond empathically to children and families. The element of her instinctual empathic response guides her interactions with children and families.

Personal experiences teachers had during their own childhoods fostered their empathic responses. This relates back to the subtheme of being relaxed and balanced having an ease to partnerships. One teacher disclosed a situation in which a child in her class was having accidents in the classroom because her parents were going through a divorce. The teacher had a similar experience as a child: her parents got divorced when she was 4 years old also. Through this teacher’s ability to make empathic inferences, she was able to talk to the child and help her deal with some of the issues she was having. The teacher’s empathic ability helped to guide her response to the child and help her deal with a situation over which she had no control. The teacher’s empathy also helped her make suggestions to the child’s parents about what might help the child to cope. The teacher recounted the following anecdote,

So looking at her, I could see that through my own eyes, and what she was dealing with and I sat her down, and I told her, “Look, my mommy and daddy were not together when I was your age” and she looked at me and said, “Oh, really?” and she was like, “Wow” and I explained to her, “That does not mean that mommy and daddy don’t love you, they just have adult problems . . . that has nothing to do with you,” and I was able to see through her own eyes . . . because I dealt with it and I kind of
felt was she was feeling. . . She thought this was her fault . . . that’s something that I needed to correct [for her]. Then we worked on it and worked on it and then by the end of the year, we saw a difference in her self-esteem and I think it was just that her whole world was becoming different . . . that’s why I had to take a step back and put my own issue out of it, but just know what she needed to get her to progress within the classroom and not affect the learning process . . . and I told [her parents], because there would be days where they wouldn’t bring her and I told mom specifically, “As much as you can keep her routine the same [it] is gonna affect her less . . . it’s going to make her not realize so much, so try to keep her routine as perfectly as it used to be as you can because that will give her the stability and not make her feel like everything’s crashing around her.

Finally, time, and the type of experience or wisdom that goes along with it, also fostered empathy. This element of time relates back to bioecological theory and the concept of the “chronosystem.” Time is a factor in a teacher’s ability to empathize with children, families, and cultural practices. Having children with a variety of abilities in her classroom over the years allowed one teacher to see the individuality of her students. This enabled her to see a variety of perspectives with more clarity. The result was the teacher’s ability to respond to the individual needs of the students.

What helped me to develop empathy [was] to see the difference . . . in abilities of kids within the room that need different things and if they’re not getting it, it also affects their personality and how they are and that I think helped me to realize that everyone is an individual.
In this subtheme of experience fostering natural empathy, the teachers perceived the mingling of their natural inclinations, their own genetic predispositions, with their personal experiences in cultivating their empathic abilities. Through the interconnectedness of nature and nurture, the experiences of the teachers fostered their natural empathic tendencies. The confluence of nature and nurture influenced how teachers responded to children and their families in ways that they felt were appropriate in meeting their needs.

**Empathy lays a foundation of emotional security and safety.** In a conversation with one of the participants, I asked how empathy affects her relationships with children and families, to which she responded, “It really does affect everything.” Teachers thought empathy was crucial to their practice, building the classroom community and understanding their students, families, and cultural practices. Teachers also talked about the importance of not judging families.

Teachers believed that empathy in the classroom creates a foundation of emotional security and safety. Creating an emotional connection with children allows the children to feel like it is all right to make mistakes and experiment with new things in their learning. Connecting with children on the children’s level allowed them to feel understood. As in the example I described earlier with the little girl whose parents were going through a divorce, when children feel understood, they can then work through an emotional experience to move forward. Another teacher spoke of empathy’s significance to the overall program and the children’s success in the classroom because of it. At the end of our interview, I asked this teacher if there was anything else she would like to add about empathy and she replied,

Just the importance of [empathy] and you can’t have a strong program without it.

Because again, with empathy comes a feeling of security and the children believe that
the teachers really care for them—and their thoughts and ideas and families—and you create the sense of safety in the classroom and it’s a stronger learning.

The idea of interconnectedness also relates to a revolving cycle that teachers described wherein teachers expressed empathy to children and families, laying a foundation of emotional security and safety. From there, the building of trust began. Parents and children were then more willing to trust and open up to teachers who were empathic to them. Having more (or more relevant) information enabled teachers to be more empathic, because they had more information to which they could respond, which in turn, led children and families to trust teachers, and partnerships deepened. Teachers saw this interconnected relationship between empathy, trust, and partnership as developing over time.

So we give [parents] an opening for that but also in that instance because they need to see our face and that’s gonna be our biggest way to communicate, with them, but also, for me, I think letting them know that they are always welcome in the room also gives them that opening because we invite them in for special projects like around the holidays. They’ll talk about the holidays, we invite them in to just come and read a book so that they are connected in some way . . . because if we didn’t have that connection, we would not be able to be empathetic, we would not get them to be able to open up and they would not be . . . so trusting of us, because they need to know who we are, too.

As a teacher described her class, she indicated the importance of including the parents and stressed not being critical of families. She said,

And I think that just how you put it across to the parents, makes them understand what you’re doing, their child is gonna be safe there. It will put them at ease. Also,
foster that real, true, relationship with the parent. When you meet them, look at them as individuals as well. Think of it as you have two classes . . . you have your students and you have your class of parents, because each parent is also different and you also have to know some may be more sensitive than others. Sometimes they’re so busy you don’t get to see them. So you have to understand that each parent is an individual as well. And also, no judgment, we can’t judge parents. Sometimes, as a teacher, we say, “Well this one never comes in, they are not able to participate . . . so maybe they don’t care as much.” We have to be nonjudgmental because we don’t really know unless that parent lets you in, what’s truly going on with them. They may be having a hard time within that school year that we don’t know about. So, we have to be very nonjudgmental and that’s how you kind of build that relationship, because I feel that if they think you’re judging that communication is going to shut down from the beginning.

The teacher went on to describe the importance of the emotional foundation with parents. She said,

Because it’s all an emotional thing and once that security whether they’re adults or children they all need security. We all need to feel safe, we all need to feel like we’re being heard, so once those things are in motion, that’s the foundation.

Teachers thought their ability to empathize with parents allowed a foundation of emotional safety with them, not only with the children. Empathy helped to establish trust. Once teachers began to build trust through empathy, partnership could build with the parent. Partnerships developed over time and through trusting interactions with each other. Building a history of responsive interactions helped them move forward. It allowed the parents to feel
comfortable sharing more personal information with the teachers, information teachers often thought was crucial to know about what a child and family were experiencing. Another teacher echoed this sentiment, saying,

We are able to talk about everything and that’s what is important for people to build a community, way outside of what is going on in the classroom and because of that I’m able to hear about what is going on in the home and I’m better able to serve their needs for the child in the classroom. I know my children and I know my families so I know, “okay this little one is sad today so maybe she was at dad’s house a little longer” or I know “grandma is sick.” So, I make a special point to meet my families and learn as much as I can about them so I can better help my children.

One teacher spoke about how her empathy and non-judgmental attitude helps her to respond to families. She told a story about how her ability to empathize with a mother helped the mother to understand how to help her children.

I don’t judge them, I don’t judge parents. And the fact that everyone has, especially now, you know, different economic statuses, you have to be very open to know that certain things are going to happen for certain reasons. And that’s another way that you have to bring empathy within the room, not only for the kids but for the parents. Two years ago in particular, I had a parent who lost her job and then immediately two, three weeks later her husband lost his job. And she had three kids. Not knowing why she was coming in here every day not talking, just dropping them off. The kids were a little bit upset, they were different. I didn’t realize this until I went to her and told her, “If there is anything that you need, please let us know. I see things are a little different and you’re not yourself.” And that was just the opening for her to
immediately sit down and talk because she needed to know that her children were safe here. [Children] know because there was instability in the home that she was worried about, that the kids get the stability here that’s also going to lead to their emotional standing. And I let her know that they feed off of you. If your emotional standing is one way, they’re going to probably be that way too.

The teachers’ ability to empathize with children and parents allowed a foundation of emotional security teachers deemed necessary to the success of the children. Empathy allowed a sense of trust to develop between teachers and children and also between teachers and parents. As trust was built, parents were willing to share more information with teachers. This allowed teachers a greater depth of understanding about what was happening in the lives of the children and their parents. It helped teachers to thoughtfully respond in order to meet the needs of the children and families.

**Awareness allows empathy to unfold.** The final subtheme of teachers’ perceptions of empathy is awareness allows empathy to unfold. Teachers’ awareness of their own feelings of empathy helped them to respond sensitively to the needs of children and families. Teachers cultivated their teaching practices and empathic responses through their awareness of their own empathy.

As I discussed in the previous subtheme, empathy lays a foundation of emotional security and safety, the ability of teachers to be mindful in their interactions to not judge children and families contributed to their success in their relationships with children and families. This third subtheme overlaps with the prior one, but the focus in this subtheme is on teachers’ awareness of their own empathy and how it enabled them to respond. The teachers purposefully responded to children and families and adapted their behavior to meet
the needs of particular situations as a result of their attendance to their empathic inferences. Teachers were not just empathizing, but they also had a level of cognitive awareness about their own empathic inferences or empathy in action. They were aware of what a child or parent was feeling, conscious they were experiencing empathy, and mindful of what that meant for their response to the needs of the child and/or family.

One teacher described a situation in which she responded to a child, not with discipline, but with care and attention when I asked if her ability to empathize affected her day-to-day practice in the classroom. Her knowledge of what his family was experiencing at the time along with the awareness of her own empathy affected how she chose to respond to his needs. She described,

Yeah, we knew the week before that mom was out of town [seeking medical treatment], and he had a horrible week. It was tough; it felt like we were reverting back. Mom’s gone for a week. Dad and Grandma were doing everything on their own with three boys at home. Yeah, he’s going to be in a mood and he’s going to challenge us again. And even though some of the things he did were mean to other kids: hitting or taking toys away. If he was really hitting and really continuing, “Yeah, you need to take a break.” But a lot of times it was just like, “Come, take my hand, come play with me for a while.” It wasn’t about disciplining him at that time. It was giving him what he needed which he didn’t know how to say.

Having the ability to empathize did not mean that teachers never became frustrated by a situation or by a child’s (or parent’s) behavior. On the contrary, they did. But the teachers who expressed sincere empathic statements were conscious of their feelings when they felt frustration. This was another difference between teachers who made critical comments and
those who did not—the attention to their awareness of the empathy they experienced, as they experienced it. There were times where they were not sure how to respond to a child or parent, but they actively reminded themselves to be empathic. One teacher exemplifies this in an example that shows empathy on the level of the child. She said,

Sometimes it can get frustrating and what I will do is to make sure that I make a conscious decision not to label the children. So, each day you begin anew. . . . We say that to the children. . . . We will say, “It’s a new day.”

Another teacher expressed awareness on the level of the parents and included advice to new teachers. She echoed the subthemes of balancing the role of the professional (from being relaxed and balanced) along with the nature/nurture aspects she sees in herself from the subtheme experience fosters natural empathy when she said,

I mean of course you’re not going to love everybody, you’re not going to be peaches and cream for every situation, but I mean it’s my nature and my character . . . is that you have to be empathetic, a teacher has to be empathetic. . . . You know, teaching is not here for the money, it’s truly work from the heart; you have to love what you are doing. . . . Try to find something that you love in the child that drives you most crazy and the parents that drive you most crazy. And it can be something small like how they smile or how they do something cute . . . and try to understand that this is their child, their baby, and they are going through a hard time transitioning just like you are. And we are the professional in this situation, so just take a big breath and make it through. It will work.

The following example also shows the need for balance and non-judgment when it was difficult for a particular teacher to cultivate empathy. She described,
So when it directly impacts the child, yes, it’s harder to feel that empathy. Especially in an abusive situation it would be very hard for me to feel empathy . . . but you also have to take a step back and use that empathy with professionalism . . . because again, you’re not here to judge, you’re here to help.

The awareness teachers had extended to information they knew they were lacking. In other words, teachers were conscious of the fact that they did not know everything that was going on in a family’s life at home. They felt that missing information was important to have—even small pieces of information could be crucial to understanding a child’s (or parent’s) behavior—and once they had it, they are better able to meet the child’s needs. One teacher described it this way:

So, depending on the child, individually, and the day, because children do react different each day. I think the day kind of dictates what’s happening and we also have to remember that we don’t know what happened before they came to our classroom. We don’t know what happened at home. We don’t know if maybe they got to bed late, whether they had an argument with their mom or their dad, something they forgot, a toy at home. Something may set their day off and we just have to figure out what that is so we know how to help them.

**Conclusion.** Teachers’ perceptions of empathy were discussed in the third theme of nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature. The three subthemes included: experience fosters natural empathy, empathy lays a foundation of emotional safety and security, and awareness allows empathy to unfold. Teachers saw their ability to empathize as a result of a natural predisposition combined with their personal experiences. They thought empathy was a key to building relationships with children and families in that it was crucial to establishing
trust. Teachers’ consciousness of their own ability to make empathic inferences, their attentiveness to their own emotions, combined with their awareness that they may be lacking information, helped to inform and cultivate their responses to better meet the needs of children and families.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

*Empathy is the most revolutionary emotion.*

Gloria Steinem

**Discussion**

The findings presented in Chapter 4 highlight the need for empathy in the early childhood classroom. I provided examples of instances when empathy is lacking and when empathy is present. Not surprisingly, teachers who made critical statements also described unsatisfactory partnerships with parents. They often expressed a desire for more from their partnerships with parents and a lack of understanding regarding the behavior of children within the classroom. This was contrasted with teachers who expressed sincere empathy. Teachers who made empathic statements reported more successful partnerships with parents and a finely attuned understanding of the behavior of children in their classrooms. I attribute this discrepancy between teachers who made critical statements and those who did not largely to the power of empathy. Empathy enabled teachers to understand, to feel, to communicate with, and to respond to the needs of the children and families with whom they work. I view empathy as a trait and skill necessary for teachers working with children and for partnering with families. As Goleman (1995) stated, “For all rapport, the root of caring, stems from emotional attunement, from the capacity for empathy” (p. 96).

**Empathy: Important for Practices Inclusive of Diversity**

Teachers who made empathic statements held a strengths view of children, families, and diverse cultural practices and did not express judgment toward or about them. Teachers valued diversity, in its many forms—ability, cultural, and socioeconomic—within their classrooms and perceived themselves as trying to support it. This echoes research on teacher
empathy and diversity (McAllister & Irvine, 2002), which has indicated that empathy is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, trait needed in working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Empathy helped teachers in this study to foster inclusive practices supportive of diversity and allowed teachers to better understand behavior, cultural practices of children and families from diverse backgrounds, and experiences of children of varying abilities and socioeconomic statuses.

Although the teachers in this study were predominantly Caucasian, children and families in their classrooms are increasingly becoming more diverse. Calloway-Thomas (2010) considers empathy “the crucible of intercultural relations” (p. 7). As the field of early childhood moves forward, teachers will need to have the ability to not only share and understand the feelings and experiences of children, their families, and their cultural practices, they also will need to be able to communicate their understanding to them. They also will need to be able to respond in a way to help meet the needs of children, families, and their cultural practices, some of which may be quite different from theirs. As I explored in the findings, teachers who were sincerely empathic described a greater ability to do this than did teachers whose criticism distorted their empathy.

**Strengths View and Relational Help-Giving Practices**

Teachers who made empathic statements took a strengths-based view (as opposed to a deficit view) of children, families, and their cultural practices. This was crucial to building relationships with children and families. Not only were teachers who were sincerely empathic able to empathize with distress and help mitigate stressful situations children and families were experiencing, but they were able to engage in positive empathy and share in the joyful experiences also. The use of empathy can help teachers foster a strengths view of
children, families, and cultures instead of perpetuating a deficit view and focusing on what is perceived to be lacking within the child, family, and/or culture. By conceptualizing empathy as both a relational and a participatory help-giving practice, as I have defined it, empathy can help teachers to better support children and families.

Empathy allowed teachers to build a foundation of emotional stability and safety to build relationships with children and partnerships with parents. Judgment, along with a lack of empathy, was a barrier to partnerships for teachers whose criticism distorted their empathy. Research by Brotherson et al. (2010) regarding partnership patterns of professionals and families in early intervention home visiting indicated that professionals often felt they were not well trained to support families’ emotional or other complex needs.

One possible way that teacher-educators can help support teachers is to provide in-service and preservice support and education regarding empathy. Keeping Katz’s (1972) developmental stages of teaching and her corresponding model of training and support needs in mind would be useful as a guide in this work.

Helping teachers understand the feelings and experiences of children and families who may be different from them may help teachers feel more prepared to work with children and families of increasingly diverse backgrounds, with increasingly diverse and complex needs. Additionally, including the element of response, or ways that teachers could help meet the needs of children and their families, is critically important for the success of the child within the classroom. Teachers are not trained as social workers and I am not advocating that they necessarily should be. However, having a working knowledge of other community service agencies to which teachers could go for support and/or refer families may
help children and families to become better connected within the community and may also
reinforce the connections between schools and the local community.

Empathy is not a magic wand, but it is an incredibly important piece necessary in
interactions between teachers and children, teachers and parents, and among children.
Empathy is crucial and must be fostered in preservice and in-service professional
development for teachers. There are potential implications for professional satisfaction for
teachers and for training on empathy, which I describe in the following sections.

**Empathy and Professional Satisfaction**

One factor that leads to professional burnout is empathy fatigue. The numbers of
public school teachers who have left the teaching profession has increased over the past few
decades (NCES, 2011). In the 1988–1989 school year, 6% of public school teachers (or
132,000 teachers) left the profession, compared to 8% (or 270,000) public school teachers
who left the profession in 2008–2009 (NCES, 2011). In the 2008–2009 school year, 12% of
the teachers who left the profession were new teachers who had taught for 3 years or less;
11% of the teachers who left the profession had taught for 20 or more years. The NCES
report does not indicate why teachers chose to leave the profession, however one possibility
is that teachers may have experienced some degree of empathy fatigue or burnout.

Compared with other helping professionals, teachers not only experience empathy
fatigue or burnout, but they also tend to do so more easily (De Heus & Diekstra, 1999).
There are many possible reasons teachers may burnout more easily compared with other
helping professionals, but part of it could be attributed to the lack of preparation teachers
receive in certain domains. Teacher preparation does not often focus on preparing teachers
for the possibility of burnout and does not focus on the promotion of self-care or coping skills.

Helping teachers to cultivate empathy, though not to the point of empathy fatigue or burnout could be one way to help teachers increase job satisfaction and potentially remain in the teaching profession longer. Larson and Yao (2005), for example, argued that empathy has become a “critical component” (p. 1104) in the patient–physician relationship. They also asserted that physicians who engage in the process of empathy with their patients experience more professional satisfaction (Larson & Yao, 2005). Perhaps teachers engaging in empathy with children, families, and the families’ cultural practices would yield a similar result in terms of professional satisfaction. With a threat of empathy fatigue along with other stressors leading to professional burnout, it is important for teachers to maintain boundaries for their own well-being while still preserving empathic responses and the ability to build partnerships with parents and family members.

**Empathy Training**

Although most of the teachers I interviewed during follow-up interviews thought that empathy was a part of their nature, a few wondered if empathy could be taught. According to Decety and Jackson (2004), empathy is hardwired in our brains and, through interactions with others, it develops. Researchers believe that empathy can be learned and that it is possible to train or enhance empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Decety and Jackson described empathy as “a flexible human capacity as well as a method of gaining knowledge of understanding another, and it is susceptible to social-cognitive intervention” (p. 94). They indicated that empathy training or enhancement could be beneficial for re-education of antisocial personalities, training of psychotherapists or
physicians, and training young children who at risk. Gerdes and Segal (2011) echoed Decety and Jackson and included implications as they relate to social work:

Empathy can be taught, increased, refined, and mediated to make helping professionals more skillful and resilient. Understanding how empathy works can help social workers “in the trenches” connect more empathically with clients from a wider range of sociocultural backgrounds while making them less vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed, burnt out, or dysfunctionally enmeshed with clients. (p. 143)

I speculate this could be true for teachers as well, as the composition of classrooms becomes increasingly diverse. In this study, teachers who expressed sincere empathy thought empathy was a part of their nature and indicated that it was a necessity for teachers. I suspect that teacher preparation programs and professional development programs also may reflect this view—that teachers are naturally empathic people, so why spend time reinforcing or developing something they are already skilled in and are doing? But as my research also describes, some teachers make critical statements and judgments toward or about children, families, and the cultural practices of the families with whom they work—evidence of a lack of understanding and a lack of empathy. Perhaps those teachers in particular could benefit from empathy training. As I mentioned previously, keeping the developmental stages of teachers and training needs in mind (Katz, 1972) could help to pinpoint efforts to support teachers. A focus on empathy in the context of ECE, increasing teachers’ own empathic awareness, and learning how to maintain empathy without reaching empathy fatigue or burnout may benefit not only teachers, but also the children and families with whom they work.
Future Research

There were many questions that came to mind throughout the process of conducting this research, including how to further develop the ideas embedded within. Ideas for continued research include further examination and consideration of empathy as a desired disposition (Katz & Raths, 1985) for teachers. Empathy, as I have defined it, includes measurable constructs of communication and response. Therefore, future research could include examining preservice and in-service teachers’ dispositions related to empathy prior to and then after the introduction of an empathy curriculum or ongoing training. Pre- and posttest scores could assess change in the teacher’s disposition related to empathy to measure if training on empathy affects teachers’ relationships with children and families, and/or job satisfaction.

Other ideas include investigating the view of empathy and partnership from the families’ perspectives. Teachers who expressed sincere empathy described positive partnerships with parents, but parents may have a different view. Interviewing families would provide another layer of understanding in how they perceive the role of empathy in parent–teacher partnerships. Bringing in the family perspective would help to give a more complete overall picture of empathy’s role in ECE, as would research to understand how families from different cultural backgrounds, compared to mainstream families, may perceive or experience empathy.

Finally, including an observational component looking specifically for empathic behaviors of teachers could provide a rich layer of data with which to work. Observation of teachers in action could provide additional information—information that may not be readily apparent to the teachers. Observational studies of teachers and empathic interactions with
children and families could help to assess the behaviors of empathy in an educational context and the outcomes on children and learning.

**Conclusion**

The research presented here has explored the relationship between empathy and partnership in the context of ECE. A total of 23 qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 inclusive preschool teachers. The interviews were analyzed to understand and interpret empathy in teachers’ relationships with children and families and to explore teachers’ perspectives of empathy. The empathic ability of early childhood teachers to feel, to understand the experiences of the children and families, to communicate that understanding, and then to respond to help meet their needs requires emotionally available and responsive teachers. Teachers must be willing to engage with children and families on an emotional level. When they do, they report more positive relationships with children and partnerships with parents and families. The field of ECE needs to help train teachers to be able to empathically respond to the needs of children and families and also to focus on self-preservation skills to avoid burnout as the diversity and needs of children and families are rapidly changing.
REFERENCES


Encarta dictionary (n.d.) Retrieved from Microsoft Word’s Thesaurus function.


APPENDIX A. RESEARCHER MEMO

12/2/11

Topic: Empathy and preschool teachers

As a former toddler teacher I am familiar with some of the teacher perspectives that were presented during the first round interviews - both empathic and critical - from my own experience and that of my former colleagues. I remember what it was like to have a classroom and trying to build relationships with families. As a graduate student, who became a parent during the researching and writing of this dissertation, I have found myself on the other end of the relationship and with the process of learning to trust a caregiver. It was a very difficult and personal process for me to come to the realization that I could not stay home full-time with my daughter and complete my PhD degree - two competing life goals - simultaneously presented. When I became pregnant, I thought I would be able and happy to work slightly more than part-time and still spend time with my baby. However, once my baby girl arrived, I wanted nothing more than to spend each moment with her. Although I had loved and appreciated my work and experiences as a graduate student, I found myself in a new mental space - one that was quite difficult for me to accept and one that I didn’t expect. I love being productive, learning new things, working with people, and feeling like I was making progress toward this life goal of mine.

Luckily, I have a very understanding major professor, who allowed me to let myself take time, slow down, and spend time with my new baby, while trying to complete coursework, write proposals, and conduct the research and analysis. Without her understanding, I don’t think I could have done both.

When the time came to find a caregiver for my daughter, I was a bit in denial about the whole thing. Gratefully, my husband and I found someone that we trust and our daughter has been doing very well in her care. The process of building that relationship, trusting, and learning to let go has not come easy for me, but it has given me a new perspective, a new appreciation, a new understanding, and a new empathy for the experiences of the families described by the teachers and the teacher’s self-report in the interviews. Having been on both sides of the parent-teacher relationship has helped me to understand this research more fully.
## APPENDIX B. INITIAL INTERVIEW SUMMARY FORM

### Family Interview Summary Sheet 9/09
**Understanding the Foundations of Self-Determinations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site:</th>
<th>Type of Interview:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewers:</td>
<td>With whom:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today’s Date:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Code for Interview:**
1. Briefly describe the family and child involved in this interview, including influence of cultural and socio-economic attitudes/strategies towards self-determination.

2. What were the main ideas or issues around interventions that you became aware of in this interview?

3. Summarize the information you gathered and interventions you found in target intervention areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention Area - Information</th>
<th>Intervention/Strategy Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Choice</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Self-Regulation</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Engagement</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Anything else that you identified as salient, interesting, or important in this interview relevant to self-determination interventions?

5. What new questions or issues will you want to ask in future interviews and/or discuss with the research team?
APPENDIX C. FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW SUMMARY FORM

Empathy and Partnership Follow-up Interview Summary Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Mode of Interview: (In-person, phone)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date:</td>
<td>Today’s Date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Describe the teacher involved in this interview:

What are the main ideas/concepts that stood out to me during this interview?

Was there anything else that stands out as interesting, salient, related to empathy and partnerships?

What new questions/issues arose during this interview? Any other questions I want to ask my next participant?

Analytic Memo

*Think critically about the interview I have just conducted. Write a few sentences in response to the following prompts.*

1.) Reflect on and write about your relations with this participant (e.g., rapport).

2.) Reflect on and write about possible emerging codes and/or definitions of codes.

3.) Reflect on and write about emergent patterns, categories, themes, and possible connections and links between them.

4.) Reflect on and write about any problems encountered (including ethical issues).

5.) Reflect on and write about any future directions this study might take.
APPENDIX D. IRB CONSENT FORM—IOWA:
INITIAL AND FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Practitioner Interview

Title of Study: Building Foundations for Self-Determination in Young Children with Disabilities: Family-Professional Partnerships

Investigators: Mary Jane Brotherson, PhD
            Susan Maude, PhD

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this study is to learn more about how young children with special needs learn to: make choices, control their behavior and emotions, become involved with people and objects around them, and how parents and professionals work together. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a teacher or practitioner for a preschool aged child with a special need.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES
If you agree to participate in this study, we will interview you about your experiences in the classroom with your students and experiences working with parents. We expect our interview with you to last about 90 minutes. We will conduct the interview at any time and place that you find convenient. The interviews will be audio taped with a tape recorder and the audio tapes will be erased at the end of the study. You may also be contacted for a follow-up interview to clarify information.

RISKS
We don’t believe this study will involve any risks. If you are uncomfortable responding to a question, you may choose not to answer. If you would like to stop participating at any time, you have the right to do that.

BENEFITS
If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping us to learn how to better serve families with young children with disabilities and the professionals with whom they collaborate.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated for participating in this study. To compensate you for your time, you will receive a $25 gift certificate your participation.
PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by the law, the following measures will be taken. Everything we learn from you will be strictly confidential, and only members of our research team will have access to the individual information for your program. When we report the results of this study, you will never be named or identified in any other way. Names of participants will not be identified on the audio-tapes or transcripts, and both will be kept in a secure location. Tapes will be erased when the analysis is complete.

Information collected for this study is part of a collaborative study with the University of Kansas and Montclair State University, therefore data collected will be shared with researchers from those universities. Like Iowa State University, the University of Kansas and Montclair State University, are required to maintain the confidentiality of research data and to ensure that research is done in an ethical and legal way, and that participants are treated fairly. By signing this consent form, you give us permission to use and share this information, within the limits described above.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Mary Jane Brotherson, PhD, Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 515-294-3677 or Susan Maude, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 515-294-2370.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, Office for Responsible Research, (515) 294-3115, 1138 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA 50011.
SUBJECT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Subject's Name (printed) _______________________________________

(Subject's Signature) __________________________________________  (Date) __________________________________________

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent) ____________________ (Date) ____________________
Date: 10/27/2011

To: Nancy Peck
74 LeBaron Hall

CC: Dr. Gayle Luze
51B LeBaron Hall
Dr. Mary Jane Brotherson
51A LeBaron

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Foundations of Self-Determination: What Practitioners are Telling Us

IRB ID: 11-196

Approval Date: 10/25/2011
Date for Continuing Review: 5/18/2012

Submission Type: Modification
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- **Retain signed informed consent documents** for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.

- **Immediately inform the IRB of** (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- **Stop all research activity** if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

- **Upon completion of the project**, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
Foundations for Self-Determination: Building Skills in Young Children with Disabilities Through Partnerships with Families

Foundations for Self-Determination is a project based in early childhood for families, teachers, and others in the community who support young children with disabilities to engage in classroom or home activities, be self-regulated, and support choice-making or simple goal setting, if needed. Our first step in the project is to ask people their opinions about what works best for them in the setting in which they work with young children. Also, it is helpful to hear about preferred ways to collaborate for parents and teachers.

The purpose of this open-ended interview is to gather more in-depth information about what early childhood educators think about the best way to encourage children’s development by increasing their time on-task, supporting problem-solving skills, and helping with other social-emotional development that is part of school success. We want to hear how you organize your classroom, what works to encourage these skills, and your insights about how a Foundations intervention we are going to develop might fit into your daily routine with minimum changes. We also want to ask you what ideas we might include in our intervention to encourage partnership with parents and how to encourage use of some strategies at home. The interview will take about 30-45 minutes, and we will schedule it at your convenience.

Please send back this e-mail to let us know if you are still interested or not (click “Reply” and check yes or no to decline). If you want to participate, we will send another e-mail to you to schedule an interview. (Or, if a phone call is better, please give us a phone number and best time to reach you). By participating, you will be helping parents and teachers in the field of
early childhood, with little or no risk, since your name and setting will not be used in any way for this project. You will receive a $10 gift certificate to thank you for your time if you sign a receipt giving your name and address. In addition, we may ask you for your social security number, but will keep this information safe and won’t disclose this to others except in the KU payment system.

Your interview answers will be completely confidential. We will audio record our interview with you, but the interview transcripts will be kept in a completely separate area from the files with your identifying information. Our reports about this will be combined across all the professionals we interview and information about you or your school will be obscured to prevent any identification of you and your work setting.

If you want more information about this study, please call Susan Palmer (785) 864-0270 or Jean Ann Summers, (785) 864-7602. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email.

Finally, please know that we understand the many demands on your time and that we truly appreciate your help!

Sincerely,

Jean Ann Summers, Ph.D.            Susan Palmer, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator             Co-Principal Investigator
Beach Center on Disabilities      Beach Center on Disabilities
785-864-7602                      785-864-0270
jsummers@ku.edu                   spalmer@ku.edu
Foundations Partnership Study

Acceptance Form

_____ Yes! I read your Invitation Letter (e-mail) and agree to participate in an interview for your study.

_____ Sorry, but I am unable to participate in an interview at this time.
APPENDIX F. IRB CONSENT FORM–NEW JERSEY

Foundations Partnership Study

Adult Consent Letter: Qualitative Interviews

Dear [Parent or Practitioner],

We are contacting you because you indicated your willingness to participate in an interview for our study. The purpose of this interview is to gather more in-depth information about how families think about how best to encourage their child’s development. We want to hear your family’s story, understand your child and his or her needs, and get your advice about what families could really use to enhance their ability to work with their child. The interview will take about 60 minutes, and we will schedule it at your convenience.

Study Title: Building Foundations for Self-Determination in Young Children with Disabilities: Family-Professional Partnerships

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this interview is to gather more in-depth information about how families and professionals think about how best to encourage their child’s development. We want to hear your perspectives and experiences and get your advice about what families and professionals could really use to enhance their ability to work with the child. The interview will take about no more than 60 minutes, and we will schedule it at your convenience.

Who is conducting this study?
This is a collaborative effort between 3 universities. Dr. Elizabeth Erwin at Montclair State University will be working with researchers at the University of Kansas and the University of Iowa. We received federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education for a 3 year grant to support this important project. This is the first year of the project.

What will happen if you participate in the study?
You will be involved in one personal interview and a follow up to participate in an interview and follow-up feedback.

✓ You will be involved in a personal one hour interview and a follow up.

What are the risks?
We believe the potential risks that you may encounter through your participation are minimal. However, there may be a few:

✓ Participation will require you to invest some of your limited time working on the project with us.
✓ While we will work hard to minimize the inconvenience, we know that having researchers visit your home can seem intrusive.
✓ We are required by the IRS to collect your social security number when we pay you for your participation. We have strict procedures in place to safeguard your information, but recognize that many people feel uncomfortable about this.
✓ We will be audio taping the interview to ensure we record your ideas and words accurately. Again, we have procedures in place to preserve the confidentiality of these results. But we recognize that some people might find this uncomfortable.
What are the benefits?
We believe the benefits to you of your participation in Foundations Study are:

✓ Your participation will contribute a unique perspective in this collaborative and important project that will ultimately benefit young children with disabilities and their development
✓ We will pay you for your participation in the interview and follow up.
✓ You may learn some important skills and ideas that may help children succeed in school.
✓ You may be able to build a stronger partnership between home and school.

Who will know that you are in this study?
All information will be kept in secured places. Your name will not be linked to any presentations or papers. We will keep who you are strictly confidential.

Do you have to participate in this study?
Please know that your participation in our study is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to answer or participate in any part of the interview and you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Also, if you decide to decline to participate in the study, your decision will not affect in any way the services you and your child are currently receiving or the work you are doing.

If you want more information about this study or about the researchers, please call
Dr. Elizabeth Erwin at (973)655-6843 or e-mail at erwind1@mail.montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Debra Zellner (reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu or 973-655-4327).

_____ Yes! I read your Invitation Letter (e-mail) and agree to participate in an interview and follow up for your study. I have read the description of this study and have answers to any questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

_____ Sorry, but I am unable to participate in an interview and follow-up at this time.

Please PRINT all information clearly!

NAME ____________________________________________

If you are a parent, name/age of your child __________

HOME ADDRESS ____________________________________________

Street Address ____________________________________________

City ___________________ State ___________ Zip Code _________

If you are a practitioner, what is your position ___________________

Name of school child attends ____________________________

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER ____________________________

SIGNATURE ____________________________ DATE ____________

I would like to participate in this study:
Please initial: _______ Yes _______ No

(continued on the next page)
Please initial:  ______ Yes  ______ No

I would like to get a summary of this study when it is completed:
Please initial:  ______ Yes  ______ No

It is okay to (audiotape, videotape, or photograph) me while I am in this study:
Please initial:  ______ Yes  ______ No

It is okay to use my (audiotaped, videotaped or photographed) data in the research.
Please initial:  ______ Yes  ______ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print your name here</th>
<th>Sign your name here</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Finally, please know that we understand the many demands on your time and that we truly appreciate your help.
Sincerely,

[Signature]

Elizabeth J. Erwin, Ed.D.
Professor and Graduate Program Coordinator,
Early Childhood Inclusive Education
Montclair State University
College of Education and Human Services
(973)655-6843
erwinel@gmail.monclair.edu

For Montclair State University Staff Use Only

Receiving Staff Signature and Date
Attention: Teachers/Providers of Young Children

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled:

**Building Foundations for Self-Determination in Young Children with Disabilities: Family-Professional Partnerships**

**Participants need to:**

Teach/Provide early education or related services for children 3-5 yrs old with a developmental disability (supported by an IEP)

Participate in an interview

Provide feedback on ideas that emerge from the interview

We want to be helpful to all who care for young children, your voice is needed!

All information will be kept confidential. Participation in this research is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time with no consequences. A gift certificate will be given to each participant as compensation for your time.

**Contact Person:** Lindsey Brown at leb@iastate.edu, 515-294-1983

| Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu | Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu | Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu | Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu | Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu | Call Lindsey Brown @ 515-294-1983 | leb@iastate.edu |
APPENDIX H. INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR SELF-DETERMINATION IN YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Practitioner Interview Protocol
10/10/09

Participants in the in-depth qualitative practitioner interviews will be drawn from among a convenient sample. Practitioners will be given initial recruitment information and if they are interested can respond verbally, or by email and indicate their interest in participation. We will then contact the selected participants by phone and ask for their continued interest and if the potential interviewee is still willing, arrange an initial interview. Consent will be signed at or prior to the first time interview questions are posed.

Introduction (Interviewer script)

My name is _____ and I want to thank you for giving us this time to talk about your ideas for young children, classrooms, and teaming with families. [Describe your role on this project]. The interview will take about 45-60 minutes and everything you share is confidential. We are talking with you as a teacher/interventionist of a young child with diverse abilities. May we record your comments?

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about what teachers/interventionists think about how best to encourage their student’s development. We want to learn more about how teachers support students in making choices, learning how to pay attention for longer periods of time, or how to problem solve about frustrations students encounter. We want to know your ideas and what is important for your student’s success now and in the future. Your story as a teacher/interventionist is important to us. We want to ask how you understand students who might need more help during the school day and his or her needs, and get your advice about what structure and connections you as a teacher might use to enhance instruction for students who need more help than usual in your class.

[Start by reviewing and signing the consent form.] Purpose, all answers confidential, withdraw at anytime, payment for your time, audio taping. If you want more information about this study or about the researchers, please call Dr. Mary Jane Brotherson at 515-294-3677 or Dr. Susan Maude at 515-294-2370 (or researchers at your site).

Finally, please know that we understand the many demands on your time and that we truly appreciate your interest in being a research partner in our project. Your “voice” is important to us. When we finish all interviews we will write a simple summary of ideas that people in several states have provided related to our interview topics. We hope the results would include some suggestions and great ideas you might like to use in your own class.
Interview Questions

A. Understanding the Classroom Environment

Objectives:
- To get a sense of the classroom and environment.
- To understand classroom priorities.
- To understand the culture of the classroom.

Grand Tour Questions:
Tell me about your classroom.
What is your biggest goal for your students throughout the year?

More specific questions/probes:
Ages and number of children in your class
Disability of the child with special needs
Describe the culture of your classroom-(i.e., Are there any special routines, traditions or activities that are particular to your classroom?)
Tell me about your expectations for your students’ development.
What are your hopes for your students in the future?

B. Choice making

Objectives:
- To understand how students indicate preferences and how they make choices.
- To understand how the teacher helps students learn to make choices.

Grand Tour Questions:
What opportunities do children have to be able to make their own choices during the school day?
How do you help students who may have trouble making decisions learn to make choices?

More specific questions/probes:
How do your students let you know what they want?
How do you know when your students like or dislike something?
How do you decide whether to let the student make choices about activities or whether you are going to select the activity?
Do your students use any assistive devices that help them make choices?
Are there certain routines, times or places that help your students make decisions?
How do you think your classroom culture might influence how your student makes choices or decisions?
How do you think the cultures and values of your student’s families might influence how your students make choices or decisions?
What advice or ideas would you have to give other teachers/interventionists who wanted to help their students be able to make their own choices or decisions?
C. Self-regulation and Control

Objectives
- To understand how children learn to regulate or control their own behaviors and emotions in the classroom.
- To understand how the teacher perceives his/her role in helping students learn to self-regulate.

Grand Tour Questions
How do your students manage their own behaviors and emotions?
Can you describe any ways that you have helped your students to regulate their own behaviors and emotions? (Strategies? i.e. Turtle Technique, butterfly taps, etc...)

Have you changed or adapted your classroom environment in any way (physical or otherwise) to help your students be more independent in regulating their own behavior or emotions? (For example, reduce auditory noise or visual clutter, have comfort items easily accessible, offer a quite space for your students to go when wanted / needed.)

More specific questions/probes:
What do your students do to calm themselves down when upset?
How do your students let you know when they need help?
Are there certain routines, times or places that help your students to self-regulate?
What kinds of things do you do to help your students comfort themselves?
Do the strategies you use change as the year progresses?
Does your student use any assistive devices that help him or her regulate behaviors or emotions?
How do you think your classroom culture might influence how your students regulate emotions and behaviors?
How do the cultures and values of the students and their families influence how your students regulate emotions and activities in the classroom (setting)?
What advice or ideas would you have to give other teachers/interventionists who wanted to help their students to be able to regulate their behaviors and emotions?

D. Engagement

Objectives
- To understand how teachers perceive and facilitate engagement of the students in their classroom.

Grand Tour Questions
How do your students become engaged with other people and things in the classroom?
What really catches your students’ attention? In fact, you may have to pull them away from something because they are so engaged? (kinds of toys or activities)
How do you encourage students to become engaged?

More specific questions/probes:
How long do your students usually spend on an activity before going on to something else?
When do your students show the greatest level of engagement in the classroom? (Why? What is happening in the classroom? What are other children doing? What is your role?)
Do your students use any assistive devices that help him or her be more engaged?
Are there certain routines, times or places that help your students to be more engaged?
How do you think your classroom culture might influence how your student becomes engaged with people and things?
How does the culture and value of students’ families impact his/her ability to be engaged with people and things?
What advice or ideas would you have to give other teachers/interventionists who wanted to help their student(s) to be more engaged?

**E. Parent – Professional Partnerships**

**Objectives:**
- To understand how teachers perceive and create partnerships with parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grand Tour Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does a successful partnership with parents look like to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What preferences do you have about partnerships and support from parents?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More specific questions/probes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What specifically do you do that you think helps to foster partnerships with parents?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think helps to support families to develop self-determination in the home?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think helps support teachers to develop self-determination in the classroom?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What advice would you give other teachers who wanted to build partnerships with parents?</td>
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APPENDIX I. FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Empathy and Partnership Follow-Up Questions

“Empathy is a predominantly cognitive (rather than emotional) attribute that involves an understanding (rather than feeling) of experiences, concerns, and perspectives of the patient [parent], combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding.” (Hojat, 2007, p. 80).

I noticed in your initial interview that you expressed statements that were particularly empathetic towards the ____ (children/families/cultural practices) in your classroom.

Grand Tour Questions:

* Tell me about your experiences with empathy for the children with whom you work.
* Tell me about your experiences with empathy for the families with whom you work.
* Tell me about your experiences with empathy for the cultural practices of the children and families with whom you work.

Possible follow-up probes:

* What, specifically, has helped you to develop empathy for the children/families/cultural practices with whom you work?
* How, if at all, do you think being empathetic helps to build partnerships with families?
* How do you perceive empathy to affect your relationships with families?
* Was there ever a time when you found it difficult to cultivate feelings of empathy towards a particular child/family/family’s culture?
  o If so, were you able to develop feelings of empathy? How?

* If you were giving advice to a new teacher, what would you tell him or her about the practice of empathy for children/families/family’s culture?
  o What would you tell a new teacher about how to develop empathy?

* What did I forget to ask you about empathy?

* Is there anything else you’d like to say about empathy and working with children and families?
### APPENDIX J. CODEBOOK SAMPLE A
(from 7/25/11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition/explanation</th>
<th>Quote from interview</th>
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| Parent involvement-flexible | Flexible about how they want to be involved, changes each year | *Participant*  
I'm very flexible about it. So each year that will vary. My preference will change depending on the group of children and the group of parents.* (p. 12) |
| Advice for partnership-accessible | Be accessible | *Participant*  
I think the biggest advice that I can do is make yourself very accessible.* (p.21). |
| Advice for partnership- be flexible | Be flexible and accessible- outside of the classroom | *Participant*  
Making yourself accessible and working around their schedule meaning that if a parent can’t meet within your timeframe, work it out mutually, where you can meet, you can have a phone conversation. Making yourself just out there as much as you can for them not to the point where it kind of overruns the classroom, but if you’re accessible, they’re going to come to you.* (p.21) |
| Advice for partnership- foster relationship with parents as well | Foster relationship with parent | *Participant*  
Also, the foster, I think that real true relationship with the parent. I wanna feel or say that when you meet them, look at them as individuals as well. Think of it as you have two classes...you have your students and you have your class of parents because each parent is also different and you also have to know some may be more sensitive than others. Some may be more, sometimes they’re so busy you don’t get to see them. So you have to understand that each parent is an individual as well* (p. 22) |
| Fostering partnership-opportunities to come into classroom | Opportunities to invite parents in- (mystery guest; parents invited in). Accept whole family. Important to learn about whole family (names of siblings) | *Participant*  
opportunities to come into the classroom, we have a program where we do mystery guest and every Friday we invite a parent in... everybody. We accept the whole family. Anybody...  
It’s also important to learn about their families I know all of the sibling’s names you know things like that to build that relationship and that rapport. And again once you have that rapport and they know that you’re open and willing to communicate.* (p.12)  

If you have a free moment and you want to come in, we have a open door policy. Come in. maybe you want to do a project, maybe you just want to hang out.* (p.13)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open door policy</td>
<td>It just gives them a bond almost, a stronger bond as a community. P.13(re: parents coming in to classroom).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bond as a community</td>
<td>It just gives them a bond almost, a stronger bond as a community. P.13(re: parents coming in to classroom).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advice on partnership- don’t judge parents</td>
<td>Don’t judge parents- reserve making judgments about what is going on with them.</td>
<td>Participant no judgment, we can’t judge parents. Sometimes as a teacher, we say, well this one never comes in, they are not able to participate...so maybe they don’t care as much. We have to be nonjudgmental because we don’t really know unless that parent lets you in, what’s truly going on with them. They may be having a hard time within that school year that we don’t know about. So, we have to be very nonjudgmental and that’s how you kind of build that relationship because I feel that if they think that you’re judging, that communication is going to shut down from the beginning.(p.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>Even small bits of interaction are nice- can help build relationships</td>
<td>Participant That’s nice, to see them it...just that tiny little bit of interaction is nice.(p. 12)</td>
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## APPENDIX K. CODEBOOK SAMPLE B
(from 10/31/11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy/ judgment</th>
<th>Definition/explanation</th>
<th>Quote from interview</th>
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</table>
| Empathetic statements         | Statements that show the teacher can understand of experiences, concerns, and perspectives of the parent combined with capacity to communicate this understanding - from Hojat’s 2009 definition of empathy -- | Participant
I want to do home visits before the beginning of the school year with all my kids. It was such a great time. It meant a lot to the families. It meant a lot to me. I think everyone was a little apprehensive at first. Pg. 8. [family].

Participant
I saw one of our girls playing with a toy like a Mr. Potato head type of activity and she’s making it and the pieces are falling out and she’s getting frustrated. You just try to model for them how they are feeling and give them words. Like, I say, “Oh, [child’s name], I can see that you’re feeling frustrated right now because these legs keep falling off and he can’t stand up. Do you think maybe we could have him lay down, or do you want to play a new game? So, sometimes, you have to tell them what those choices are that they know that this is a choice and they don’t just have to be mad or stay here and take it. So trying to point out how they can make choices. Pg. 11 [child].

Participant
Yes, it’s a challenge for him. He’s a smart guy and he realizes that it’s hard for him to do and the rest of his peers seem to be doing just fine with it. Pg. 13 [child].

Participant
There’s sort of that need to understand child development and what they might be thinking; knowing that every child is not going to be perfect. Therefore you can’t put blame on Patrick or just put blame on him when an incident occurs, because the rest of them are struggling with it as well. Pg. 14. [child].

Participant
I feel like at our level, it is so important to work closely with the family and have that relationship. I respect their culture and I’m not going to make them choose something that the family would not want them to, but honestly, I haven’t run into that. Pg. 8.

Participant
So, like my little boy, we know exactly what he needs when he comes in if he’s having a rough day or if he’s angry, then on his picture schedule, right when
he comes in, he has a “walk” on there. Pg. 10.

Participant
The kids are young, but they want to be heard. Pg. 12. [child].

Participant
I’ll have parents come in and say, “they will sit and pay attention and listen.” At home it’s really easy to break you down. At school, we really try to be consistent. I think consistency is really key. With parents, sometimes it’s harder to have consistency with a schedule or routine. I think consistency is what makes them successful. Pg. 15. [family]

Participant
If there is going to be a big change, like we’re going to have someone come or go watch something, I always prepare them in advance like, “Okay, today’s going to be different,” or “tomorrow we’re going on a field trip.” They know we’ll be gone so they only have time for a snack and go home. I think preparing them for change really helps them adapt themselves. Pg. 16. [child].

Participant
First couple of weeks, it’s kind of hard with moms, we have a window they can look into until the kid gets used to their mom being in the room. Then when they get used to their mom being in the room, they can easily adjust and have their mom come in and she can help them play in centers or read books. Pg. 17. [child]

Participant
As far as preferences, as much as the parents want to be involved, I say the better. I always encourage the parents to come in, but I’m aware that not everyone can come in, not everyone can go on field trips. Pg. 18.

Critical Statements
Statements that are critical in nature or have an underlying judgmental tone
A lack of understanding of experiences, concerns, perspectives of the child/family/culture

Participant
I have the gamut. I have parents who really run with it and say, “Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that.” Some of them are already doing it and say, “I hadn’t thought of it, that makes sense.” Some of them don’t feel sure. “Well, you’re the teacher, you know how to do it, I’m just the parent, I don’t know how to do it.” . . . And then some parents, this sounds bad, but kind of talk the talk, “oh yea, I’m going to do that” but then don’t ever follow through. Those are the kids that don’t make the progress that we’d like to see. p. 13. [family]
Participant
But then I think it gets more difficult. Some parents take it too far. ‘Well, I don’t want to have to give two whole choices for a meal, either French fries or tater tots and then I have to make both of them.’ So, well, if that’s not ok with you, then don’t offer that as a choice. pg. 14. [family]

Participant
The only thing... I guess there’s a couple families that are more of the English learner families, or some of the lower income families that may not interact that much with their kids anyways. So there’s just not a whole lot of stimulation within the environment. P. 15. [family/culture]

Participant
But usually, they’ll listen to my spiel about choices and say, “oh yeah, I totally get that” and it may not happen. Pg. 15. [family/culture]

Participant
Mainly what I see in that is kind of cultural, in terms of. . . Some of my families, their cultural beliefs is that they shouldn’t really have to self-calm, that they would rather hold them all the time, or they don’t realize they’re reinforcing bad behavior. Or “Oh she started to cry, I have to pick her up immediately”. So I think it’s almost there, and not always a specific culture, but just how they were brought up that they hear them cry, “I gotta pick them up, make sure they’re ok”, and even they they see it working, like in the preschool setting, and they’re like “well they’re just horrible for me at home”, they still really have a hard time with, ‘well if you just don’t go immediately. . . . I’m trying to think of another example. Some parents just rely more on, some cultures again, look more on a bottle or a pacifier and just sticking that in their mouth even at the age of 3-4 because they just think that that’s the easiest way to do it. Pg. 25. [culture].

Participant
. . . but again, some family beliefs are that, ‘Oh, once the home intervention teacher/speech pathologist gets here, I get my 30 minute break. I don’t have to be there for that.’ And as much as we try to have them come and learn what we’re doing, because our goal is to teach them how to do what we’re doing so that they can do it throughout the day and their daily routines. Sometimes the parents aren’t engaged. . . . pg. 32. [family].
... as far as some parents, when we don’t tell them every time their child has been in a time out or whatever, that’s not a . . . we’re not tattle tailing on them, we’re just trying to get them a calming spot where they can calm down and the child will go home and tell the parent and the parent comes back in the next day and they’re all upset because they’re child was in a time out and you didn’t tell me and, you know, it wasn’t that big a deal that we felt we had to go that far with it. Pg. 17-18.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher strategies for PARTNERSHIP</th>
<th>Parent Engagement STRATEGIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many ways [need to retile this]</td>
<td>Many ways to connect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>the newsletters three times a week. We have e-mail. They can come to us in the morning. Some parents write us little notes in the morning. Some will leave us voicemail. So there’s many ways for them to communicate with us. (p. 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport building- with students and parents</td>
<td>Building rapport with students and parents- allows you to do so much more in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Respect them. Respect them. Listen to them. . . I think all children want to feel as if they are a part of something, they have a voice, that they are able to be heard. I think by doing that and like I said really gaining a great rapport with your students you’re really able to do a lot of things that you wouldn’t be able to do. I have been fortunate to do some really amazing things with my students because the rapport I have had with them and their parents. And I always say at the beginning of the year I am the teacher but there is not I in team, we will always work together. I always say I’m one of those crazy teachers that give out my home phone number. . . . It’s about us working together to move forward. (p. 11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage Parent involvement</td>
<td>Parents involvement is encouraged; Increases sense of community, enriches experience for children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Well the parents are encouraged to come in, I love a strong partnership with the parents. (p. 10).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It just makes it more enriched, have all the different generations of people coming together, it really enhances the sense of community. (pg. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older children involved in classroom</td>
<td>Older children come in for paired reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Then we also have a fifth grade class that comes over from the school which is across the street, which is an elementary school 3 through five, and they come</td>
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Teacher facilitating parent child relationship

Communication with parents as a way to facilitate the parent child relationship

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<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>i.e. daily sheet goes home</td>
<td>Participant says: “... all of my students go home with a daily sheet that says what stories we read. ... One of the reasons I do that is because if you ask a child, “what did you do at school,” they’re not going to remember. ... and that is one of the ways that I am trying to do a partnership with them is that they’re asking about their child’s day, so they are involved in their child’s life ... but that is really important.” (p. 27).</td>
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Teacher sends newsletters home 3xs a week- so children can talk to parents about what is happening- keeps students engaged

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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sends newsletters home 3xs a week</td>
<td>Participant says: We send newsletters home three times a week about what’s going on in the classroom so that the parents can talk to their children about what is going to be happening or what is happening so that keeps them engaged because they want to tell their parents. (p. 23)</td>
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Home visit

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<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher goes to child’s home and meets family and child</td>
<td>Participant says: “... we went to every single child’s home and you know some were at night and some were during the day ... and so each child got that special one on one time with me ...” (p. 32).</td>
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What is Partnership for teachers?

| Relationship with foundation of trust | Participant says: It’s an open relationship where there is a foundation of trust. There’s two-way communication, there’s parent involvement, there’s a sense of comfortability where if they have a problem they can come to me. If I have a concern, I’m comfortable sharing it with them, and it is just a whole team of people who are working on the goals and development of the child, looking at their strengths and challenges and what is best for the child and the best way to do that is through partnering. (p. 21). |

Need strong communication with parents

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<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participant says: Well you know a strong communication between the teacher and the parents. (p. 15)</td>
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Ongoing communication

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Participant says: I feel like it is a lot of ongoing communication. Parents are willing to ask questions and write back and forth. (p. 27).</td>
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Open communication

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participant says: With parents, you have to have open communication, I mean constantly let them ... if there is a problem, anything positive, keep that open communication, let them know how the child is...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>做（p.15）。</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>- Just talk; talk like you are talking to a friend. (p.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>It allows you to learn from them[parents] and just always keeping that communication open (p.20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>I think that’s where you feel comfortable with open communication. p. 26.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Just making sure that you have some sort of daily conversation with them that’s just open and engaged. It’s not necessarily always about the child. It’s definitely on a personal level. It really does open up all lines of communication. P. 28.</td>
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| Participant |Open communication. It definitely is hard. . . . As I’ve gained experience I’ve realized how important it is to go out of your way and talk to the families. Especially in the beginning right when they start, just to start that open communication and just listen to the families. It’s just so valuable for the success of the child. P. 18. |

| Participant |Successful partnership, to me, looks like when you’re communicating you are on the same page (p. 20) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>develop relationship with parents; then can act as a team</th>
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| Participant |Communication. And that is the thing. Good, bad, whatever. It is really about communication and again you work just as hard working to develop a relationship with the parents as you do if not harder than you do with the students. Once they understand that you’re out for the same thing, working for the betterment of children you can really get them to be on your side. You can really work together as a team. We act we always we work as a team, we work together. Everything is about us working together. p.12 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Partnership dictates child’s success</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Partnership with parents dictates rest of the year/child success</td>
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| Participant |. . . but you have that communication because the parent is by far the one that knows their child first and foremost, so for you to be really engaged with them and have a successful partnership with them is going to dictate the whole rest of the year and that child’s success (p.20) |

| Participant |Open communication. It definitely is hard. . . . As I’ve gained experience I’ve realized how important it is to go out of your way and talk to the families. |
| Partnership — seen at end of the year | Success shows up at the end of the year | **Participant**  
*Especially in the beginning right when they start, just to start that open communication and just listen to the families. It’s just so valuable for the success of the child. P. 18*  

**Participant**  
That partnership is so key because I think if you really have good partnerships it’s really going to be beneficial to the students and to the parents to have that collaborative back and forth and honesty. It’s not easy having a child with special needs. P. 18.  

**Participant**  
I also wanna say success with the parents is at the end of the year, you both can sit back and tell each other how that child learns, things that you did that worked, things that you did that didn’t work specifically with their child. It allows you to learn from them and just always keeping that communication open. (P.20) |
APPENDIX L. CODEBOOK SAMPLE C
(from 12/6/11)

Empathy
From Hojat’s 2009, pg. 413- definition:
“Empathy is predominantly a cognitive attribute that involves understanding of experiences, concerns, and perspectives of the patient [parent] combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding.”

Critical
From Encarta Dictionary: North America (Microsoft Word’s “Thesaurus” function)
1.) not approving- tending to find fault with somebody or something, or with people and things in general
2.) giving comments or judgments- containing or involving comments and opinions that analyze or judge something, especially in a detailed way.
Judgmental- tending to criticize- tending to judge or criticize the conduct of other people.

Major categories: Empathic vs. Critical Statements
Subcategories: Child, family, cultural levels
Codes in Bold

Synthesis statements written of my interpretation of what teacher is saying.
Memos of what I think it means.
[Bracketing: my personal opinions or feelings about what the teacher is saying- so I can see how my feelings might influence my interpretation.]

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I have the gamut. I have parents who really run with it and say, “Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that.” Some of them are already doing it and say, “I hadn’t thought of it, that makes sense.” Some of them don’t feel sure. “Well, you’re the teacher, you know how to do it. I’m just the parent. I don’t know how to do it.” . . . And then some parents, this sounds bad, but kind of talk the talk, “oh yea, I’m going to do that” but then don’t ever follow through. Those are the kids that don’t make the progress that we’d like to see. p. 13. [family]

Memo: criticism focuses on lack of follow through on parents’ part; leading to a lack of progress in child- parent blame.
Teacher doesn’t mention or address possible family’s point of view- that perhaps suggestions may be more than family is capable of at the time; expresses a lack of understanding of family situation.
The only thing . . . I guess there’s a couple families that are more of the English learner families, or some of the lower income families that may not interact that much with their kids anyways. So there’s just not a whole lot of stimulation within the environment. P. 15. [family/culture]

Memo: criticism focused on family’s “status” as English learner or lower income—focus is negative-parent blame—suggests that as a reason for lack of progress in child.

Teacher doesn’t express an understanding of possible cultural differences—-for example - that the families may be in a new culture, new town, or may be overwhelmed. Shows a lack of understanding of what family may be experiencing. Making assumptions about what happens when teacher is not in home- (lack of stimulation). . .

| Partnership | Not mention or characterize partnerships with families |

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I have, right now, a child who readily will travel to India, so she will be out about two to three times throughout the year for about a week. You know, so I have to prepare for that because I’ll give her some of the work to go with her to keep her up with, you know, with what’s going on in the room and the parents really love that because they are still connecting even though they are far away with family. And again different holidays right now at this season, I have different holidays like Diwali, which is from Hindu, you know, the Hindu background. I have Las Posadas from the child that I spoke about before, he comes from Mexico. Then we’re doing Christmas, Hanukah, so I have a very wide range and I’m able to open that up in the classroom with the lesson plans. I’m going to be incorporating just every holiday and what that will really make it do, is make it personal for them and it’s really going to relate and it allows tolerance within the home because all the other children are getting to know, hey, it’s just not how we do things, but there’s a whole world out there and there’s many, many other things and we have to be tolerant of what people kind of do and what their kind of background and how they kind of celebrate things, you know. P.3-4. [child, family, culture].

Memo: This statement is a powerful example of empathy on all the levels- this teacher sees from the child’s perspective how important it is to celebrate their cultural practices- and how important it is to help children learn tolerance and acceptance for others’ beliefs. She sees from the family’s perspective and shows that she values their beliefs and incorporates that into the lesson plans. She sees how the cultural practices are enriching the classroom practices and how it benefits the children and enriches the experience.

In the first example of preparing work for the child who will be away- she is practicing empathy by seeing the child and family’s need in keeping the child connected to the classroom community. Her empathy leads to a more connected classroom community.
So, those are my goals, to kind of push them along, but not to the point where they get frustrated. I’m not setting them up for failure. Pg. 5 [child].

Memo: Teacher expresses her goals for her students- but sees that pushing too far will lead to frustration (child experience) and that she doesn’t want the result of frustration- perhaps just growth.

Community and parents is very big. At this age, we invite parents in. We get active in the community. I bring back information from the library for you know, could be maybe I wanna say it could be one big activity that they’re doing at the library. Get that out there and then all the parents meet. So it’s really socializing parent wise and it’s also kind of connecting the kids, all at the same time. Pg. 7. [child, family]

Memo: This teacher sees her role and connecting parents and the community- she sees it as an opportunity for parents to meet and socialize- seeing from their perspective- and connecting the children too, outside of the classroom.

So, they’re seeing that there are many choices and yet, there’s also the choice for them to have their little down time, quiet time because some children, they just need that. They may come in and get overwhelmed and then they need that kind of down time, five minutes or so. So, we have a quiet time. So they can make a choice to basically do nothing for five minutes and just come down or maybe kind of realize, let me take everything that’s going on and then I can jump right into it. So they have a choice of all of that. Pg. 9. [child].

Memo: Teacher sees from child’s POV- that they need some down time- and gives them a choice in it. This empathy affects her planning and practice of daily events with children.

. . . I’ve had many children who we just had a gym class, and they’re new to the teacher and you know, they were very hesitant to do what he was asking. Some were afraid, some didn’t know how to perform the task. So, what did I do? My partner and I, we went in there and we actually did it with them. And basically, them seeing that we can do it, they kind of look back and say, now I know just by looking at the teacher, this is not gonna hurt me. It’s nothing to be afraid of, so I’m gonna try and they do it. Pg. 13 [child]

Memo: This anecdote shows empathy and the result of that empathic understanding manifests through her behavior- staying with the students- empathy evident in her practice. The students as a result felt more comfortable and participated in the gym class. Perhaps, the next time, they didn’t need her to stay . . . (don’t know this, but just wondering).
[Bracketing: This example is a huge example of empathy in my opinion- many teachers see “specials” like gym or art as their time away from their students and time to plan or catch up- and the fact that this teacher took time to look from her students’ perspective- that they were afraid of the new gym teacher and stayed to help her students feel more at ease, says that she is connected with her students and really cares about their feelings and well-being. ]

So, depending on the child, individually, and the day, because children do react different each day. I think the day kind of dictates what’s happening and we also have to remember that we don’t know what happened before they came to our classroom. We don’t know what happened at home. We don’t know if maybe they got to bed late, whether they had an argument with their mom or their dad, something they forgot, a toy at home, something may set their day off and we just have to kind of figure out what that is so we know how to help them. Pg. 18. [child].

Memo: Teacher expresses empathy of thinking of different possibilities of what could have happened to set a child off- understanding that there is information she is missing, but taking that into consideration in how she treats and responds to them--and then how to react or respond to met their needs and help them. This understanding of potential perspectives manifests through her practice.

[Perhaps an increased communication could help to fill in the holes of the missing information- and increase empathy for child experience.]

So, making yourself accessible and working around their schedule, meaning that if a parent can’t meet within your time frame, work it out mutually, where you can meet, you can have a phone conversation. Making yourself, just out there as much as you can for them, not to the point where it kind of overruns the classroom, but if you’re accessible, they’re going to come to you. P. 29. [family].

Memo: Teacher is really trying to be accessible to families- understanding that they may not be available during school hours, but it needs to be mutual- putting self out there- with boundaries- but parents will come if you offer yourself.

. . . and I think that just how you put it across to the parents, kind of makes them understand what you’re doing, their child is gonna be safe there. It will put them at ease. Also, the foster, I think that real, true, relationship with the parent. I wanna feel or say that when you meet them, look at them as individuals as well. Think of it as you have two classes . . . you have your students and you have your class of parents, because each parent is also different and you also have to know some may be more sensitive than others. Some may be more, sometimes they’re so busy you don’t get to see them. So you have to understand that each parent is an individual as well and also, guide, no judgment, we can’t judge parents. Sometimes, as a teacher, we say, well this one never comes in, they are not able to participate . . . so maybe they don’t care as much. We have to be nonjudgmental because we don’t really know unless that parent lets you in, what’s truly going on with them. They may be having a hard time within that school year that we don’t know about. So, we have to
be very nonjudgmental and that’s how you kind of build that relationship, because I feel that if they think you’re judging, that communication is going to shut down from the beginning. Pg. 30. [family].

Memo: * Quote this in dissertation*
Teacher understands that parents have a need to make sure their child is safe in the environment- fosters a true relationship with parent- need to see parents as individuals- and their individual personalities and needs. No judgment- expressly says not to judge parents and that teachers make assumptions about why some parents can’t come in- have to be nonjudgmental because don’t know what’s going on. Judgmental attitudes affect communication with families- shuts down. Being Non-judgmental helps to build relationship.

Seems that nonjudgmental attitude comes as a by-product of empathy.

[I love this example of having two classes- one of students and one of parents- I never thought of this in my own practice- but I think it would have added a lot to my relationships with parents if I had. Very powerful statements about not judging families.]

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<td>Partnership</td>
<td>If the parent’s telling the child one thing, we’re on the same page and we’re telling them the same thing at home. [school?]. I wanna say communication, very open, throughout the year. It’s not just about conferences, we meet twice a year, that’s it. It’s about inviting them in. It’s about getting everyone involved. As parents, as far as what’s responsible in the room that their child needs to bring something, it’s there, but you have that communication because the parent is by far the one that knows their child first and foremost, so for you to be really engaged with them and have a successful partnership with them is going to dictate the whole rest of the year and that child’s success, p. 27.</td>
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Memo: Communication important and understanding that parent knows child best= partnership and engagement with family dictates rest of the year and child’s success. **Quote this**


APPENDIX M. FINAL THEME SUMMARY:
MEMBER CHECK AND REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK

Overview of the project:

Initial interviews were conducted with 18 inclusive preschool teachers in conjunction with the *Building Foundations for Self-Determination in Young Children with Disabilities* research study. Research team members spoke with you about the idea of self-determination and how as teachers you were supporting children in the areas of engagement, choice-making, and self-regulation in your classroom. We also talked about the strategies you used and how you promoted partnerships with parents. As part of my dissertation work, I analyzed those interviews and then build upon them with follow-up interviews with five of you. Specifically, I wanted to know:

3. How can we understand empathy in teachers’ relationships with young children and families?

4. What are preschool teachers’ perceptions of empathy in the parent-teacher partnership?

How I defined empathy for this study:

In the context of early care and education, *empathy* is the ability to: feel what the child or parent is feeling, understand what the child or parent is feeling, communicate that understanding to them, and then respond in a way to help meet their needs.

What I found:

*Initial Interviews*

Generally from the initial interviews, most teachers expressed some degree of empathy towards children, families, and/or their cultural practices (in varying combinations). However, there were some teachers who expressed statements that were critical or judgmental of children, families, and/or their cultural practices; there were even a few who did not make any empathic statements at all.

I wanted to learn how we could understand empathy in teachers’ relationships with children and families. So, focusing on the teachers’ statements (not the teachers themselves) I divided the statements up and described them as being *critical* or *empathic*. I also looked at how teachers described their relationships or partnerships with parents and families. Although it did not come up as a topic in every initial interview, it seemed that teachers who made critical statements about children, their families, and/or their cultural practices did not describe their relationships with families as positively as the teachers who only made...
empathic statements. Of those teachers who made empathic statements and also described their partnerships with families, they described more positive partnerships than teachers who expressed critical statements.

Follow-up Interviews

After I read and analyzed the transcripts of the initial interviews, I followed-up with five teachers from the initial interviews and we spoke more about empathy and partnership. I interviewed teachers who made empathic statements, only. I wanted to understand how you became so empathic in your work with children and families, what you thought about the idea of empathy in early childhood, and how that affected your relationships with families. Here is a visual overview of themes from the interviews and I will explain the themes in more detail below.

Themes

1.) Criticism distorts empathy - from the initial interviews- some teachers made critical statements, some teachers made empathic statements, and some teachers made both critical
and empathic statements. It seemed though that for teachers who made both critical and empathic statements that their empathy was overshadowed by the criticism. Statements that reflected criticism represented a deficit view of the child, family, and/or cultural practice (as opposed to a strengths view) and even blamed the child, family, or cultural practice for certain “problems” the teachers’ perceived in the child, family, and/or culture.

2.) Expressing sincere empathy- from the initial interviews- some teachers expressed only empathic statements. The statements reflected an authentic or sincere empathy toward the child, family, and/or cultural practice. The empathic statements indicated an attempt to understand the child, family, and/or culture practices, shared in their feelings, communicated that understanding in some way to the child and/or family, and then attempted to help support the child or family in some way. This theme has 4 sub-themes. They are:

- **Embracing inclusion as a philosophy** refers to the teachers’ philosophy of inclusion of all. Not only children with disabilities, not only children of diverse ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds; teachers manifested their empathy by embracing and including everyone who came into their classrooms.

- Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were responsive to the needs of children and families in a relaxed and balanced way. They shared the feelings of and understood the overwhelmed parent who was rushing around in the morning to get to work on time and so they tied their child’s shoes for them instead of letting their child do it. This was evident in their approach to partnership and in how they tried to meet the needs of both the children and the parents.

- **Being responsive to culture** meant that teachers incorporated families’ cultural practices and ideas into lessons and were able to share the feelings of the families. Teachers shared the joy and the pride families described when they were able to express their cultural practices in their child’s class. Sharing these feelings built relationships. It meant that teachers perceived parents as more likely to trust them and partner with them in the future.

- Empathic teachers used many different methods to engage in meaningful communication with families. They used email, wrote multiple newsletters home, made phone calls, handwritten notes, and spoke with parents—in-person, before and after school. They also went on home visits. Teachers who were engaging in meaningful communication with families also described more success in their partnerships. For these teachers, empathy was a tool they used to inform how they responded to families.
3.) Nurturing empathy’s interconnected nature- from the follow-up interviews- focuses on the teachers’ perceptions of their experiences with empathy. The concepts of nature and nature, parents’ responses to teachers’ expressions of empathy, and the teachers’ awareness of their own empathy mingled together in this theme.

- Experience fosters natural empathy details how teachers’ perceptions revolved around their understanding of their own empathy development. Each teacher responded in one way or another that being empathic was “just part of my nature.” Most also thought that empathy and teaching went hand-in-hand—being empathic came naturally for teachers (or thought it should come naturally for teachers).

- Empathy lays a foundation for emotional security and safety discusses how teachers think empathy affected their relationships with children and families. Teachers thought empathy was crucial to their practice, building the classroom community, understanding their students, families, and cultural practices. Creating an emotional connection with children allows the children to feel like it is alright to make mistakes and experiment with new things in their learning. The idea of interconnectedness also relates to a revolving cycle that teachers described where teachers expressed empathy to children and families, laying a foundation of emotional security and safety. From there, the building of trust began. Parents and children were then more willing to trust and open up to teachers who were empathic to them. Having more (or more relevant) information enabled teachers to be more empathic, because they had more information to which they could respond. This lead children and families to trust teachers; and partnerships deepened.

- Awareness allows empathy to unfold addresses teachers’ awareness of their empathic inferences and their ability to see empathy playing out in their teaching practice. Teachers’ awareness of their own feelings of empathy helped them to respond sensitively to the needs of children and families. Teachers cultivated their teaching practices and empathic responses through their awareness of their own empathy. The teachers purposefully responded to children and families and adapted their behavior to meet the needs of particular situations as a result of their attendance to their empathic inferences.
Document requesting thoughts and feedback.

Please write any comments/thoughts you have regarding the summary of themes I provided in the space below. Include anything you'd like to add, anything you thought I missed, or would like to change. The purpose is to see if "I've gotten it right." These are my interpretations, what I've seen from my perspective. Your thoughts are very valuable to me and for this process. Thank you.

Please indicate if you would like me to email you a copy of the final dissertation, once it's completed.

☐ Yes, please.
☐ No, thanks.