Exploring the Personal and Professional Experiences of Men Early Childhood Teachers in Victoria, Australia

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Abstract

Despite political and policy efforts to increase the number of people identifying as men working as early childhood teachers (ECTs), they continue to be under-represented in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings globally. Previous research has highlighted a range of societal, structural and institutional barriers that explain low participation rates of men in the profession. Being men in ECEC is found to be challenging as they negotiate their presence in a sector numerically dominated by women.

This qualitative research study explores personal and professional experiences of four teachers who identify as men and who work with children (aged under five years) in ECEC in Victoria, Australia. Data were gathered through more than six hours of semi-structured interviews with the four participants. Each participant discussed personal and pedagogical artefacts from their life and ECEC settings so the connection between personal and professional experiences could be further analysed.

The study uses a cultural-historical wholeness approach to examine different perspectives—societal, institutional, personal—and their relationship to each other. The research aim is to gain a holistic view of the experiences of men ECTs and how these influence everyday practices and pedagogy. The literature review identified limited to no studies focusing on experiences of men ECTs from a cultural-historical perspective. Additionally, the research examines men ECT's perspective about working relationally with others within and across different institutional settings. The concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency can be usefully applied to examining the experiences of men ECTs, including their capacity to work agentically with women colleagues, parents, and other men ECTs.

Findings show that for all four participants, life experiences influenced their decision to work as ECTs and their pedagogical preferences. Being men ECTs further informed

everyday practices. According to the participants' descriptions, they both challenged and reinforced stereotypes as men ECTs. Teamwork and collaboration were highly valued by all participants, whilst mentoring and professional networks were also found to be important. Participation in different institutions, namely family, sport and the arts, further informed pedagogical preferences and influenced development of motives.

Considering these findings, it is argued that a cultural-historical wholeness approach can expand understanding of the interwoven nature of the personal and professional lives of men ECTs. A dialectical relation between societal values, institutional practices and individual actions of men ECTs exists. The participants use their agency to navigate or negotiate being men ECTs, including managing tensions and responding to societal and institutional demands. Family practice is particularly important for pedagogy, including collaboration, complemented by participation in other institutions.

Insights into men ECTs' practice, relationships and work in ECEC are gained through this cultural-historical study. Although the small sample size means generalisable recommendations cannot be made, some possible implications for supporting men ECTs are considered. Theoretically, there are further opportunities to build a holistic picture of men ECTs using a cultural-historical wholeness approach. Implications could further extend this study by delving more deeply into the intersecting identities and experiences of men ECTs, recognising they are not a homogenous group.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Nicole Rodger

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I want to recognise that the inspiration for this research came from my work with Plan International, an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls, an organisation I have had the privilege to work for, for over 17 years. As a program manager, technical advisor and policy and advocacy lead for early childhood development in Plan International, my work includes trying to increase engagement of men (whether as fathers, caregivers, educators or leaders) in child development, play and early learning through programming and influencing. This research is therefore tied to my professional work and interests. My manager, Melanie Swan, supported me, including letting me take significant amounts of leave during the final months, so that I was able to complete this thesis.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, Dianne and John. They worked hard when I was growing up to ensure I had a good public education. They supported me to go to university and pursue my many interests and dreams in both my personal and professional life. Through their actions, they have always set a great example for me and have encouraged me throughout my life.

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(writing mechanics, formatting, references, contents page and page numbering). The editing process did not include any changes to the thesis structure, content or arguments.

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Glossary

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)–encompasses early stimulation, play and learning supported by educators/teachers in centre or home-based settings. Also known as Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

Early childhood teachers (ECTs)–in Victoria, early childhood educators/teachers are employed at long day care services, preschools and kindergartens. They are Certificate III, Diploma, Bachelor or Master degree qualified and work directly with children under five years of age, providing care and support for play and early learning.

Men Early Childhood Teachers (MECTs)–in this thesis I use the acronym MECTs for the participants, who are early childhood teachers who identify as men. I also refer to them as men teachers. This recognises that the term ‘male’ refers to sex assigned at birth, and the physiological and biological reality of being male, whereas men refers to an individual’s felt and experienced gender within their society and culture.

List of Abbreviations

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
ECD	Early Childhood Development
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more
NQF	National Quality Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PI	Plan International
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Chapter 1: Background to the Research

1.1 Introduction

The research aim of this study has been to explore personal and professional experiences and perspectives of four early childhood teachers (ECTs) who identify as men, and work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) with children under five years old in Victoria, Australia. The theoretical framework draws on both cultural-historical theory as articulated by Vygotsky (1987, 1998) and a contemporary reworking of his theory by Hedegaard (2009). Hedegaard's wholeness approach enables consideration of different perspectives—societal, institutional, personal—and how these are interrelated. Further, Edwards's (2005, 2011) concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency have been used to analyse how the study participants perceive collaboration and joint work. Additionally, the participants' engagement across a variety of institutions, specifically family, sport, and the arts, has been examined. Since each institution has its own values and traditions (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010), how participation within and across a range of institutions influenced the everyday practices of the participants has also been investigated.

The participants were identified through non-probability snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). Approximately six hours of qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Each participant also shared and discussed personal and pedagogical artefacts from their life and their ECEC settings. Hedegaard's planes of analysis (2012a) and levels of data interpretation—common sense, situated practice, thematic (2008b)—were used to guide analysis of the data.

Overall, the study gathered insights into practices, relationships, personal experiences and professional work of the four participants. The study contributes to existing literature by using a cultural-historical theoretical framework as a lens to examine the experiences of men early childhood teachers (MECTs), with limited to no equivalent studies found in a review of

the literature. Although the small sample size means that the findings cannot be generalised to all MECTs, suggested implications and potential future research areas related to supporting men teachers in the profession are included.

1.2 Personal Orientation to the Research Problem

Stimulus for research ideas can stem from personal and social experiences, interests, and a desire to address societal challenges (Flick, 2007). Objective and value-neutral approaches are increasingly recognised as unrealistic because of the likely influence of the researcher's own values on choices of what to include and what is silenced across the whole research process (Bryman, 2016). My professional background has informed an interest in understanding barriers and opportunities for recruiting, supporting and retaining men in ECEC, given they are widely under-represented in the profession. My values of advancing social justice, gender equality, and challenging gender norms also influence this interest.

The impetus to research MECTs is linked to my work for Plan International (PI). As a global development and humanitarian organisation, PI supports children's rights and equality for girls. At PI, I have worked as a program manager, technical advisor, and policy and advocacy lead for early childhood development (ECD). The ECD work of PI includes a focus on men's engagement in early childhood as part of a gender transformative approach.[1] Typically, PI's ECD programs around the world have faced challenges in garnering active, meaningful and ongoing participation from men, including in ECEC settings. The reasons identified for this are numerous, including social and gender norms about men's roles and capabilities, policy settings or services that do not enable or encourage men's involvement in children's lives, and limited examples of different ways of being men (Plan International &

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[1] For Plan International, a gender transformative approach goes beyond addressing symptoms to explicitly tackle the root causes of gender inequality, particularly unequal gender power relations, discriminatory social norms and systems, structures, policies and practices. https://plan-international.org/sites/default/files/media_wysiwyg/glo-our_global_approch_to_programme_and_influence_approach-final-io-eng-jun18.pdf

Promundo, 2021). My role at PI includes supporting programming and influencing work at national, regional and global levels aimed at increasing engagement of men (whether as fathers, caregivers, educators or leaders) in child development, play and early learning. I recognise the importance of men working in early childhood so that young children can develop relationships with a range of genders and men can demonstrate their ability to perform nurturing and caring roles. Additionally, the presence of more men promotes workforce diversity, can lead to increased use of gender-conscious pedagogy in the classroom, and is one entry point for promoting a more gender-equal society. Therefore, I have a clear commitment to help increase men's engagement in ECD in my professional life. Exploring the experiences of MECTs through my research is an extension of that work.

1.3 Policy Context for Early Childhood Education and Care

A brief examination of policies and frameworks that guide ECEC is important to better understand the context in which ECTs work in Victoria, given the relevance for pedagogy and everyday practices. The professional experiences of ECTs are influenced by policies and regulations including quality standards and learning and development frameworks such as the National Quality Framework (NQF; Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2020) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF; Department of Education and Training, 2016). These documents provide direction to ECTs on training and professional development, practice principles, pedagogy and children's learning outcomes, and for collaboration with colleagues and families.

In terms of quality standards that govern work in the early childhood sector, key benchmarks are set by the NQF (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2020). Seven quality areas have been identified. Of particular relevance to my study are quality standards related to staffing arrangements and to relationships with children

and families. For example, Quality Area 4.2 promotes collaboration, respectful interactions, and building on the skills and strengths of others. Quality Areas 5 and 6 also emphasise collaboration, respect and partnerships, with a view to enhancing children's learning and ensuring that families are engaged and involved in the services their children attend. These quality areas suggest that a capacity to work relationally with others is promoted.

In addition to the NQF, the VEYLDF (Department of Education and Training, 2016) aims to support people working in ECEC through outlining *Practice Principles for Children's Learning and Developmen*t as well as *Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes*. Aligned with the NQF, the VEYLDF recognises the importance of respectful, responsive and active partnerships with families that help support children's learning, and engage families in that learning, as one key practice principle. For early childhood professionals, partnership is also a practice principle. Collaboration, sharing of information, joint planning, mutual respect and mentoring relationships are all promoted, as is participation in early years networks. Understanding the policy context is important since they influence and shape interactions, everyday practices, activities and choices of ECTs.

Together, the NQF and VEYLDF are informed by the philosophy and priorities of governments for the ECEC sector. From the perspective of a cultural-historical wholeness approach, these policy documents reflect societal values for young children, inform practices and relationships in the ECEC setting, and influence individual decisions, pedagogy and ways of working. They form part of the research context for understanding how policies and societal expectations frame everyday practices in ECEC. Chapter 7 will explore this further.

1.4 Research Questions

This study has explored and analysed the personal and professional experiences and everyday practices of early childhood teachers who identify as men by addressing the following research questions:

How do the personal and professional experiences of early childhood teachers identifying as men influence their everyday pedagogical practices?

How do early childhood teachers identifying as men perceive collaboration and reciprocal support across different institutional settings?

The research questions have been informed by a cultural-historical theoretical framework as well as Hedegaard's (2009) wholeness approach to explore societal, institutional and personal perspectives as understood and experienced by study participants. Further, the research questions draw from Edwards's (2005, 2011) concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency to analyse the perceptions of experience and professional practice by MECTs, specifically related to collaboration. These concepts are useful for discerning how men teachers may work relationally in and across practices and a range of institutions, in ways that develop their problem-solving and ultimately facilitate joint action. Chapter 3 outlines how the theoretical framework has been applied to MECTs in this study. Finally, the research questions direct my focus on the participants' identity as men.

1.5 Significance of the Research

Despite political and policy efforts to increase the number of men who care for and teach young children in many countries (Brownhill & Wright, 2018; OECD, 2019), men continue to be under-represented in ECEC settings, including in Australia (Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Department of Education and Training, 2017; Warin, 2019). The literature has identified men as important in ECEC because of a need to address the gender imbalance in the ECEC workforce, a desire for children, and particularly boys, to have men teachers, and the opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles and norms (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019). Recently, there have been a large number of studies on MECTs, particularly in the last fifteen years. However, there are limited to no studies that focus on the personal and professional experiences of MECTs from a

cultural-historical perspective. By drawing on a cultural-historical theoretical framework and methodology, my study employs a different lens to deepen the understanding of MECTs' personal and professional experiences. Relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency are other concepts used for analysis of the in-depth interviews with the MECTs. The study findings may help to enhance knowledge on how MECTs can successfully negotiate their professional roles in ECEC. Furthermore, my study may have implications for further research to identify ways to support MECTs in the sector.

1.6 Thesis Overview

My thesis consists of eight chapters beginning with this introductory chapter (Chapter 1) that sets out the research context, rationale and significance of the study. Chapter 2 examines existing literature about MECTs. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework: the cultural-historical wholeness approach; and the key concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency. Chapter 4 presents the qualitative research methodology, the participant's profiles, how data has been collected and analysed, and ethical considerations. This chapter includes how the research design relates to the cultural-historical theoretical approach.

The key findings and sub-findings pertaining to the two research questions are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature. In conclusion, Chapter 8 summarises and elaborates on the implications of the findings, including a discussion of areas of potential future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of academic and government literature on men who work in ECEC. Key themes in the literature are examined, such as the limited presence of men in the sector and barriers to men choosing this career path, contradictions and tensions that MECTs navigate, and men's motivations for working in ECEC. Furthermore, this chapter provides an overview of literature that focuses on men teachers' pedagogy, practices and agency.

2.2 Reasons for Low Number of Early Childhood Teachers Identifying as Men

Historical and more recent literature on men working in the early childhood profession has consistently reported on the low rates of men in the sector, in differing cultural contexts (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Warin, 2019; Wright, 2018). In the United Kingdom less than 2% of men have been employed in ECEC (Brownhill & Wright, 2018; Jones, 2016), in the United States they have made up less than 3% of the workforce (Cole et al., 2019), whilst in China, just over 2% of the total number of kindergarten teachers have been men (Yang & McNair, 2021). In Nordic countries such as Norway and Sweden, the percentages of men working in ECEC as teachers was slightly higher at 10% and 5% respectively. Even so, men still represented a very small proportion of the total workforce (Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Heikkila & Hellman, 2017). In Australia, men were only approximately 4% of the workforce in ECEC long day care settings (Department of Education and Training, 2017). There are multiple reasons for the low numbers of men in ECEC highlighted by the literature, including relating to stereotypical gender norms, the low value placed on ECEC overall, and concerns about the motives of men who work with young children.

A range of societal, structural and institutional barriers have been identified as deterrents for men to choose a career in the early childhood sector. Traditional gender stereotypes are a significant barrier to participation of men in early childhood work. ECEC has generally been perceived as women's work due to stereotypes about women being naturally nurturing and loving (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Brody, 2015). Women are viewed as more capable of meeting the needs of young children (Bhana & Moosa, 2016). Doubts have been expressed about men being able to provide both the care, as well as the education work in ECEC (Brody, 2015; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013). Moreover, the gendered understanding of childcare has contributed to the low-status of the profession, devaluation of early childhood work, and poor pay rates of ECTs. These have all been identified as further disincentives for men (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Jones, 2016; Yang & McNair, 2021). Additionally, social stigma can be a barrier for MECTs. Data from several studies found that breaking of gender norms and stereotypes about maleness and masculinity has led to men being subjected to ridicule for working in a sector dominated by women (Bhana & Moosa, 2015; Cameron, 2001; Yang & McNair, 2021).

Another factor mentioned in the literature is fear of accusations of child abuse by men working in ECEC. MECTs have confirmed experiences of facing concerns about their motives and behaviour (Bhana et al., 2022; Cole et al., 2019; Hedlin et al., 2019; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020; Wright, 2018). Whilst it is considered acceptable for women to be motivated to work in ECEC because they enjoy working with children, by contrast the same motive has been questioned for men (Cameron, 2001). The real threat of paedophilia in society and discourses around paedophilia have significance for perceptions of men as a potential risk to young children (Eidevald et al., 2018; Hedlin et al., 2019). Men who work in ECEC have often needed to be cognisant of their gender, particularly in relation to physical contact with children (Bhana et al., 2022; Brody, 2015; Eidevald et al., 2018). Negative

discrimination has been experienced by men such as not being allowed to change children's nappies (Hedlin et al., 2019).

Despite facing numerous potential barriers to undertaking and sustaining a career in ECEC, there is still a high demand for MECTs. A significant focus in the literature has been a political and policy imperative to attract men into ECEC (Brownhill & Wright, 2018; Francis, 2008; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013). The rationale for recruiting more men includes: addressing gender imbalance in staffing mix (Rohrmann, 2020; Warin, 2019); the feminization of the ECEC sector (Mallozzi & Galman, 2015); the academic underperformance of boys (Warin, 2019); and the need of all children, but particularly boys, to have a male role model or father figure (Bhana et al., 2022; Brownhill, 2014, 2015; Rohrmann, 2020; Sargent, 2013). Some research literature has found that parents, other workers and managers have favourable attitudes towards men teachers in ECEC (Rohrmann, 2020; Sak et al., 2019; Sargent, 2013).

Additionally, MECTs have recognised that it is relatively easy to find work and to advance in the sector since their presence is broadly viewed as desirable (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Yang & McNair, 2021). The experience of MECTs matches the phenomenon of the "glass escalator" (Nentwich et al., 2013, p. 3), where men who work in occupations dominated by women are promoted at faster rates than women (Cameron, 2001; Nentwich et al., 2013; Yang & McNair, 2021). Cameron (2016) has also confirmed this structural advantage related to men's participation in non-traditional occupations such as the ECEC sector.

Overall, the literature illustrates ways in which stereotypes and norms that exist within society have been and continue to be challenging for men who work in ECEC, albeit with some advantages to men who do choose this career path. As a result, low numbers of men in the sector is an ongoing issue. For those men who do work with young children, a

growing body of literature has investigated how they manage expectations and demands and what impact this has on how they define and express themselves.

2.3 Contradictions and Tensions Experienced by Men Early Childhood Teachers

Much of the literature has emphasised how MECTs navigate or negotiate tensions and contradictions (Cameron, 2016; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Sumison, 2000). Men in the sector regularly address tensions around who they are and who they are expected to be (Brownhill, 2014; Brownhill & Oates, 2016). This *identity dissonance* is defined as a struggle to either comply with or resist hegemonic masculinity in different forms (Warin, 2006, p. 523). Nentwich et al. (2013) further explored the idea of *identity dissonance* based on nine qualitative interviews with men working in Swiss nurseries. Their study discussed ways in which men sought to manage their masculine identity as MECTs in a female-dominated profession by positioning themselves as "being both 'the other' and 'the same'" (p. 4) through an emphasis on difference as well as sameness in their practices. Masculinity was constructed in opposition to femininity, but femininity could also be appropriated by men. They positioned themselves as a "(symbolic) father" and a "male breadwinner" with a focus on career (p. 7) which meant being a "complementary other" (p. 12). Further, their study demonstrated an emphasis on equality, equal treatment and task-sharing (including nappy-changing) between men and women (Nentwich et. al., 2013). Brody and Gor Ziv (2020) further explained this tension as a need for men to exist in a hybrid space, with a blending of male and female identities and actions. In this way, men are constantly living and interpreting what is meant by masculinity and masculinities (Jones, 2007; Sargent 2013). Together, these studies acknowledge that being men in ECEC can be complex, requiring flexibility and negotiation of their identity as men.

The academic literature describes how policymakers, parents, other teachers and MECTs themselves emphasise the benefits of men as male role models for young children.

However, the contradictory nature of expectations for male role models has been identified (Brownhill, 2014; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Sargent, 2013; Xu, 2020). For example, in a qualitative study that included in-depth interviews with 54 MECTs and 20 women who work alongside men in ECEC, Sargent (2013) described how the concept of a male role model was commonly used by both women and men, but there were diverse understandings of what this meant for girls and boys. A recurring understanding of male role models by participants in Sargent's study was the idea that girls needed men to perform in non-stereotypical ways, whereas boys needed exposure to traditional masculinity, discipline and control. The perceptions of male role models vary in other ways, such as men as "caring, safe, and positive, challenging gender stereotypes" (Xu, 2020, p. 116) juxtaposed with expectations of men acting as a father figure to affirm and teach boys through gender stereotypical activities that reinforce traditional gender roles (Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Cameron, 2001; Xu, 2020). The concept of a male role model is further complicated by tensions that may exist between personalities and beliefs of individual men and expectations enforced by others (Brownhill, 2014). Additionally, some of the qualities and characteristics valued for a male role model, such as being a "good person" and having a "positive attitude towards learning" can be considered as non-gender specific (Brownhill, 2014, p. 255). Ultimately, it is difficult to meet expectations as a role model when there is no clear understanding or definition of what this means in practice (Brownhill, 2015). Much of the literature on MECTs addresses this male role model discourse related to expectations and tensions men face.

By contrast, the desire of MECTs to be good at their work in ECEC is highlighted, where gender may be limited as a consideration. For example, "becoming a pedagogue" is a more gender-neutral professional goal that is valued by men and helps to elevate individual personality and skills (Nentwich et al., 2013, p. 7). Play and child-centeredness is another feature of quality pedagogy considered important for ECTs overall (Brody, 2015). A focus on

professional development, professionalisation, training and quality assurance means gender differences become less significant (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). In some contexts, for example, in early years settings in Scotland, or in Hong Kong, professional experience, shared workforce responsibilities and teamwork between women and men has generally been viewed as more important than gender (Xu, 2020). When men have expressed a desire to work in ECEC on the same basis as women, the emphasis was on their work as educated, professional teachers, rather than as men teachers (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Nonetheless, a qualitative study by Brody (2015) recognised the value of constructing a masculine component to professional identity for six experienced men teachers. Brody identified how aspects of a masculine identity included "charisma, initiative, daring, physicality and playfulness" (p. 351), coupled with an ethic of care and commitment to children's needs. This combination of characteristics meant that the men were able to view themselves as competent MECTs, which supported their commitment and retention. The reviewed literature illustrates the complex nature of professional identity and how this can be either decoupled from, or linked to, being men teachers.

Overall, the research directs attention to contradictions and tensions in the everyday lives of MECTs. Managing expectations and demands can be challenging, particularly in a context where stereotypical views are widely held in society about what it means to be men. The literature analyses how men face contradictory expectations to both reinforce and challenge gender norms, and also how professional standards promote gender neutrality. Men are navigating these tensions in their everyday practices and relationships in ECEC.

2.4 Non-Binary Understandings of Gender in Early Childhood Education and Care

Much of the research about men working in the early childhood profession reflects on dominant discourses and binary understandings of gender. It confirms how expectations of men (and women) who work in ECEC largely subscribe to traditional gender roles,

reinforcing essentialist understandings of men and women (Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Cameron, 2001; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Heilkkila & Hellman, 2017; Wright, 2018). Some MECTs reinforce gender stereotypes and roles for women and men, girls and boys, including perpetuation of a gender binary (Cameroon, 2001; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Jones, 2016; Xu et al., 2022). MECTs can also reinforce cultures of hegemonic masculinity (Xu, 2020). Despite this, men who teach young children have sometimes had their sexual orientation and masculinity questioned (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Cameron, 2001). The literature again reinforces how men who work in ECEC need to navigate complex and contradictory gender expectations and norms.

In relation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) teachers, ECEC settings, as well as the education system more broadly, are recognised to be challenging spaces due to perpetuation of narrow understandings of gender, sexuality and family structures based on heteronormative assumptions (Cooper, 2017; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). Fears about child abuse and the influence of LGBTQIA+ teachers on children's sexuality and gender identity do exist in society (Longley, 2020). In recent years, however, more attention has been paid to LGBTQIA+ identities and how to accommodate diverse genders in teacher education and in ECEC (Lee & Carpenter, 2015; Longley, 2020; Warin & Price, 2019). Despite this, there is limited literature to be found on the personal and professional experiences of LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse staff working in ECEC. Although gender and sexuality research is important, the current study has a focus on ECTs who identify as men rather than specifically on diverse gender identities, sexual orientations or LGBTQIA+ communities.

2.5 Men's Motivations for Working in Early Childhood Education and Care

Literature exploring the lives and pathways of men who work in ECEC demonstrates that for many men, the decision to enter the profession to care for and teach young children is

motivated by a range of factors. Studies indicate that early experiences, the influence of family members, a belief they can positively impact the lives of children, and the desire for professional and personal fulfilment from employment in ECEC contribute to men choosing this career (Jones, 2016; Jones & Aubrey, 2019; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). An interest in children and childhood, coupled with prior experience with children, are additional factors motivating MECTs (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020).

To better understand men's motivations, career trajectory and professional development when working in ECEC, the mixed methods study of Reich-Shapiro et al. (2020) involved data collection from 46 men teachers. Participants reflected on messages from their own childhoods about what it was to be men. The study found that participants' desire to pursue a career in ECEC—in opposition to traditional masculine norms—was often influenced by positive early experiences with children, as babysitters, camp counsellors and volunteers in afterschool programs (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). Similarly, men participants in a study undertaken by Heikkilä and Hellman (2017) had some experience of working with children before training as preschool teachers, including through work or internships at a preschool. Finally, Jones (2016) identified how the opportunity to build relationships and to support children's learning contributed to a sense of personal and professional fulfilment for MECTs.

Another motivation for men teachers found in the literature is to model a different form of masculinity and a more complex expression of gender through their work in ECEC. Some men view themselves as challenging gendered attitudes and stereotypes through their presence in ECEC, including at a time when children are constructing their own gender identities (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). Showing that men can be caring is also important for children (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Xu, 2020). A desire to provide an alternative to traditionally accepted gender roles and norms that they themselves have grown up with,

influences the decision of some men to enter the profession (Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). Having a positive influence on children's development, including in relation to gender, seems to be important to some men overall.

2.6 Men Early Childhood Teachers and Pedagogy

The relevance of gender to teaching and learning has been examined by numerous studies, including in relation to perpetuation or challenging of gender norms and roles with children. For instance, a question explored in the literature is whether gender of the teacher impacts pedagogy and child outcomes in ECEC (Besnard & Letarte, 2017; Gold & Reis, 1982; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2017). In a mixed methods study conducted by Besnard and Letarte (2017) in Canada with 53 participants (23 men), it was found that there were typically no identifiable gender differences in educational practice and classroom management style of men and women teachers. The main reason identified for this finding was consistency in the training requirements for all teachers (Besnard & Letarte, 2017). Olsen and Smeplass (2018) also reported that when it came to pedagogical activity with children, there were no significant differences between men and women, including in their interactions with girls and boys. This is consistent with the data obtained by Huber and Traxl (2017), who focused on interactions between men and women teachers and children. However, they did detect some distinctions in the behaviour of children, including boys actively seeking more engagement with MECTs whereas girls showed a less obvious reaction to gender of the teacher. Moreover, the propensity to move freely around the room and interact with others was more pronounced in children who had a MECT. Similarly, the research of Bernard and Letarte (2017) concluded that the presence of MECTs had some impact on children's behaviour such as less timidity, withdrawal and anxiety. Despite this, there is not generally considered to be substantial evidence supporting the idea of gender differences in teacher effectiveness for either girls or boys.

Research has tended to emphasise the role of teachers for influencing children's experiences and understandings of gender as part of a broader field of study on the impact of gender stereotypes and norms on children. Through the lens of feminist poststructuralism, MacNaughton (1997, 2000) and Blaise (2005) argued that all teachers need to bring gender into focus in their pedagogy, challenge gendered practices in children's play, and engage in ongoing critical dialogue with parents and colleagues about gender. That such an approach is needed is demonstrated by research in Chinese early childhood settings, for example, where binary understandings of gender and societal expectations that MECTs will save boys from a "crisis of masculinity" are reflected in the daily interactions and gender performances of children (Xu et al., 2022, p. 347). However, in many contexts, challenges to traditional notions of gender and masculinity are both possible and desirable through awareness of, commitment to, and training on, gender conscious pedagogy, gender diversity and gender equality (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Rohrmann, 2020; Warin 2019; Xu et al., 2022).

The research to date has not convincingly shown an impact of MECT's presence on pedagogy, interactions and child outcomes, other than in a limited way (see for example, Bernard & Letarte 2017; Huber & Traxl, 2017). Nonetheless, in many ECEC settings pedagogy and everyday practices do either challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Cameron, 2001; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Xu, 2020; Xu et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to examine MECT's pedagogy in ECEC in the context of broader societal concerns, institutional and individual practices.

2.7 Agency of Men Early Childhood Teachers

Finally, the literature broadly identifies individual agency as important for teachers, including early career teachers. Professional agency can mediate classroom experiences and a commitment to teaching (Edwards, 2005; Heikonen et al., 2017). There is limited literature

specifically exploring agency of MECTs in relation to career choice, motives, retention and practices. However, the fact that some men choose to stay in ECEC may indicate agency as a factor.

Agency is identified as an essential ingredient needed to understand the relationship between person and practice and how individual teachers negotiate or navigate institutional demands (Edwards & Chan et al., 2019). Agency becomes visible when the response of an individual teacher to demands in practices reflects the preferences, intentions and commitments that matter to them (Edwards & Chan et al., 2019). The link between agency and Hedegaard's work (2012a) on development of professional motive orientations will be examined further in Chapter 3.

Specifically in relation to men in ECEC, a study by Brody and Gor Ziv (2020) examined how agency was important for men to reconcile the contradictions and tensions between masculinity and the requirements of a caring profession. They described men's career decisions to work in ECEC and attempts to negotiate their identity as men in a women-dominated setting as "hybridized agency" (p. 20). For the three MECTs in Brody and Gor Ziv's study (2020), a "unique blend of 'male' and 'female' agentic styles" was required to negotiate both their daily work environment as professionals and their status as men in a feminised space (p. 32). My study builds upon this literature on individual agency to also explore perceptions of collaborative forms of agency by MECTs.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided a brief summary of the literature relating to MECTs. From the studies reviewed, it is apparent that the presence of men in ECEC is understood as desirable and beneficial. However, men teachers can experience mistrust, and expectations to either reinforce or challenge gender norms. This influences what MECTs do and how they are perceived and understood by others, and how they manage their own professionalism. The

next chapter describes the cultural-historical theoretical framework that informs the current study and outlines why this framework has been selected.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with a brief overview of different theories that have been used to explore MECTs' perspectives and experiences before introducing the cultural-historical wholeness approach as the lens for analysis of the personal and professional experiences of the study participants. The chapter also outlines other key concepts, namely: relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency. Together, these theoretical concepts provide the framework that have guided my data collection and analysis.

3.2 Theoretical Frameworks Applied to Research on Men Early Childhood Teachers

There are limited to no studies using cultural-historical theory for analysis of the personal and professional experiences of MECTs as a unique group. The majority of studies of men in ECEC have applied: gender and masculinities theories (see Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Cameron, 2001; Cole et al., 2019; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Nentwich et al., 2013; Sargent, 2013; Wright, 2018); constructivist perspectives on masculinity and femininity (see Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Hedlin et al., 2019); post-structuralism (see Brody, 2015); and feminist post-structuralism (see Warin, 2019). These theories put gender at the centre of the analysis. As outlined in Chapter 2, they explore the contradictory expectations around gender roles and norms, the feminised nature of the ECEC workforce, and the way men teachers can either reinforce stereotypes or advance gender equality (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). Applying a cultural-historical wholeness approach provides an alternative lens to examine MECTs experiences and perspectives that takes account of gender, but does not primarily focus on gender.

3.3 Cultural-Historical Theory

Lev Vygotsky's (1987, 1998) cultural-historical theory has been significant for enhancing understanding of human learning and development. Vygotsky's work on child development has been extended by contemporary theorists such as Hedegaard (2008a, 2009), and Fleer and Hedegaard (2010). Hedegaard (2009) has articulated a theory of child development influenced by cultural-historical thinking and more recent works of psychologists and philosophers like Claus Riegel (1975) and Marx Wartofsky (1983). These writers have recognised the influence of varied psychological, cultural and societal factors on children's developmental possibilities (Hedegaard, 2009).

Cultural-historical theory has evolved to be applicable to different age ranges, from young children to adults. Despite its original use for understanding child development, Hedegaard's approach (2009) is adaptable to this study of MECTs, through examination of social settings, institutional practices and cultural and historical factors. Hedegaard's work has been used as part of supporting teachers' professional practice (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019), and as a reflective tool for practitioners (Edwards, 2017a). Hopwood (2019) has further demonstrated how Hedegaard's concepts and principles can be adapted to particular contexts to solve different kinds of problems, with his research on interactions between children, parents and professionals in early intervention services with at-risk children and their families. In the current study, the experiences and perspectives of men teachers as a unique group in ECEC will be examined through the lens of a wholeness approach.

3.3.1 Wholeness Approach

Hedegaard (2009) extended cultural-historical theory by developing a model to consider societal, institutional and personal perspectives as a way to understand learning and development (Table 3.1). The three perspectives give a holistic view: taking into account broad cultural traditions and values related to societal conditions; practices within particular

institutional settings; and an individual's concrete activities, engagements and motivations within institutional practices (Hedegaard, 2009). Together, this represents a wholeness approach. Although Hedegaard also included the activity setting as part of her wholeness approach, it is not a focus in this study due to the limitations of the study size and methodology, with no direct observations of the participants undertaken. This made it difficult to attend to interactions at the micro level of activities. Therefore, just three perspectives are examined. Table 3.1 outlines the major distinguishing features of these perspectives.

Table 3.1

Perspectives of the Wholeness Approach

Perspective	Description	Reference
Societal perspective	A macro view of the society in which individuals live, learn and work. Encompasses the conditions for institutional practice, considering culture, traditions and values.	(Hedegaard, 2009, 2019; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013)
Institutional perspective	People are involved with multiple institutions like family, school, places of worship and sport. All institutions have different practice traditions, motives and values which set the conditions for different kinds of interactions and activities.	(Hedegaard, 2008a, 2009, 2019; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013)
Personal perspective	Learning and development of the individual in everyday life, including development of motives.	(Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Hedegaard, 2009, 2019; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013; Hedegaard et al., 2008)

A wholeness approach has been applied to gain insights into child development, play and learning by analysing how broader societal conditions and children's participation across institutions has influenced children's motives and activities (Hedegaard et. al., 2008; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). When extended to MECTs, the wholeness approach of studying "daily life across different institutional settings and arenas from all three perspectives" (Hedegaard et al., 2008, p. 11), provides a new lens to understand their experiences and motives. Like children who participate in institutions such as family, home and after-school care (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013), men teachers engage in practices across a range of institutions such as education, sport and the arts. Practices in one institution cross over and can shape the participants motives and everyday practices in other institutions (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). A wholeness approach additionally considers how the societal, institutional and personal perspectives are interrelated. For example, government policies are societal level frameworks that influence institutional priorities in ECEC settings and shape the professional experiences, actions and everyday practices of MECTs. Hence exploring the relationships between perspectives is important (Edward & Fleer et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Motives, Demands and Tensions as Part of a Wholeness Approach

Motives and motive orientations fit within the institutional and personal level of the wholeness approach (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019). While Hedegaard's research (2008a, 2012a) has focused on understanding the development of motives by children, Edwards (2020) has recognised that the motives of adults are also influenced by interactions within institutional practices. Development of motive orientation has been described by Hedegaard (2012a) as "a movement initiated by the learner's emotional experience related to the activity setting" (p. 21). Furthermore, motive orientations can be identified through "capturing how…demands are recognised and responded to…[and enable people] to work with the expectations or embedded motives in the practices they inhabit" (Edwards & Fleer et al.,

2019, p. 6). Ultimately, motives are culturally shaped and developed by individuals as responses to demands in institutional practices (Fleer, 2014). Motives can either align with or transcend these practices (Hedegaard, 2008a). The personal perspective is therefore reflected through the individual's motives and activities across the different institutions in which they participate, and how they inform each other.

The concept of motive orientation as defined by Hedegaard, has been expanded to include human agency (intentions and commitments) and to enable exploration of purposeful actions carried out in response to demands in institutional settings, including by teachers (Edwards, 2020; Edwards & Chan et al., 2019; Edwards & Hedegaard, 2019). Edwards and Chan et al. (2019) have connected agency with the emergence of motive orientations by considering "how agency [is] exercised in response to the demands encountered" (p. 201). These demands are present in practices, for example in school or the family, and by combining human agency with motive orientation it is possible to examine differences in how demands are approached (Edwards & Chan et al., 2019). As explained by Edwards and Fay (2019), "the development of a person's motive orientation in a practice is therefore connected to their sense of who they are and what they can do in the practice" (p. 265). As noted in Chapter 2, there is existing research that identifies the importance of agency for men teachers in an environment in which they can experience specific expectations and demands (Brody & Gor Ziv, 2020).

Finally, the interplay of the cultural-historical concepts of demands and motives can lead to tensions from the personal perspective, given the need to either negotiate or navigate demands. Addressing institutional demands, for example, in schools can be negotiated if these demands largely align with the preferences and commitments of the individual teacher. However, misalignment requires either an adjustment in personal motives or some way to navigate the demands (Edwards, 2020; Edwards & Chan et al., 2019;). Edwards (2020)

explains that “we are agentic beings interpreting and responding to demands in practices with actions that are given shape by our motive orientation” (p. 3). Teacher agency is therefore further evident through examining if and how teachers respond to demands through their everyday practices. In Chapter 7, I explore the relationships between motives, demands and agency for the MECTs in this study.

3.4 Working Relationally

The concepts of *relational expertise*, *common knowledge* and *relational agency* sit within a cultural-historical frame by providing a lens to understand how teachers work relationally in and across practices and a range of institutions. Edwards (2005, 2011) has explained relational agency as one way to understand teacher practice and experience. Relational agency focuses on a collaborative approach, rather than an individualistic one (Hopwood, 2022), and is mediated by relational expertise and common knowledge (Edwards, 2005, 2011). Taken together, these concepts mean that individual agency can be strengthened through cooperation (Edwards & Fay, 2019). Motive orientations are also relevant, recognising that knowledge of “what matters” (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021) can enhance collaboration. All these concepts can contribute to understanding the personal and professional experiences and everyday practices of MECTs.

The first key concept of *relational expertise* is defined as “the joint interpretation of the problem as well as the joint response” (Edwards, 2017a, p. 8). This form of expertise is different to professional expertise in a specialist area of work. Relational expertise combines an understanding of one’s own knowledge and practice with the perspectives of others, to enable collective work on particular challenges (Edwards, 2017a). Secondly, this process facilitates the formation of *common knowledge,* defined as an understanding of what motivates action by oneself and by others (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021). Edwards (2012) has related common knowledge specifically to cross-practice work where it has been “deployed

as a resource to bring people together and then as something that needs to be created to enable collaboration" (p. 27). The importance of mutual understandings of "what matters" to practitioners has been further highlighted as vital to the exercise of relational expertise and building of common knowledge (Edwards & Hedegaard, 2019). Rickinson and Edwards (2021) explain that "knowledge of what matters for each other then becomes a resource to be used when interpreting a problem and when planning and taking joint action on it" (p. 4). Motives are also important for relational expertise and common knowledge, given the link with institutional practices and the need to recognise and align with the motives of others (Edwards et al., 2017; Edwards, 2020). Finally, *relational agency* is defined as "individual change as a result of joint action" (Edwards, 2005, p. 174), or "the unfolding of joint purposeful work" (Edwards & Hedegaard, 2019, p. 10). Ultimately, relational agency is about working with other professionals, practitioners or stakeholder groups (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021). The problem-solving process that results is described as drawing on different strengths from actors in the same situation at particular times, depending on whose skills are most needed (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021). Together, relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency are therefore crucial tools for collaboration.

A variety of relationships, motives and ways of working—how these can be negotiated and ultimately aligned to a common purpose—can be described and understood through the lens of relational work. Hopwood (2017), for example, recognised that relational expertise and common knowledge were both present in professional-family relationships as part of a family partnership model, and were informed by a continually evolving understanding of what matters. Hopwood found relational agency in the way professionals worked with each other and with families, to help families build their resilience and achieve their goals.

Furthermore, Heikkilä (2018) developed a concept of municipal agency from the foundation of relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011) for her work examining the recruitment of more men to preschools in Sweden. She used this concept to understand how organisations (a network of municipalities) worked together and evolved particular processes over time to "act, react and perform change" (Heikkilä, 2018, p. 137). She identified that different kinds of expertise were required that related to preschool, human resources and gender equality. She demonstrated how to expand upon the understanding of relational work to describe the way that organisations—and the individuals who work in them—are able to collectively address particular challenges in a way that changes over time (Heikkilä, 2018).

Another study applying relational agency to ECEC examined early years multidisciplinary networks (Duhn et al., 2016). These networks were made up of different kinds of early years service providers, with the aim of supporting professional reflection, inquiry and peer support. By applying Edwards's (2005, 2011) concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency, Duhn et al. (2016) identified a sense of professional belonging and identity, a commitment to collaboration and building relationships, and a willingness to collectively identify and work on issues or challenges as key factors in making these networks successful.

A more recent account of agency is to be found in the work of Hopwood (2022), who situated relational agency within an examination of different approaches to agency framed by cultural-historical activity theory. Hopwood identified key characteristics of agency, including the collaborative nature of agency, and the relevance of intent and motives. Finally, the overall importance of agency for enabling social, economic and political change was recognised: "through agentic actions both the person and the world are transformed" (p. 114). By highlighting the opportunities for relational agency to stimulate change, the agentic actions of MECTs could enable transformation of some of the challenges, stereotypes and

barriers for men in ECEC. In my study, I will explore how MECTs perceive relational work and how that may assist them to navigate and negotiate societal, institutional and personal perspectives related to ECEC.

Finally, the concept of relational agency is also relevant for understanding mentoring. Numerous studies explore mentoring, the way it has evolved, and the benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees, including in ECEC (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Cummins, 2004; Hobson et al., 2009; Kupila et al., 2017; Morrissey & Nolan, 2015; Nolan, 2017; Nolan & Molla, 2018). The reciprocal nature of mentoring has been described as a key feature (Kupila et al., 2017; Nolan, 2017). Furthermore, Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak (2019) have articulated the value of "exploring mentoring through the lens of relational agency [because it] stresses the nature of mentoring as a dynamic, joint activity between mentors and mentees in a particular socio-cultural context of action" (p. 184). Their study has drawn on Edwards's (2005) work to focus on different patterns of interaction and levels of relational agency to analyse student ECTs' experiences with mentors. They examined the power relations within mentoring triads (student teachers, cooperating teachers and teacher education college supervisors); the culture of the institutions (kindergarten and college) from which the mentors came; and the propensity (or not) to engage in hierarchical relationships (Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2019). The use of Edwards's concept of relational agency to examine mentoring relationships and professional networks has not, to my knowledge, been applied specifically to MECTs. However, opportunities and challenges for collaboration and reciprocal support in terms of mentoring have been highlighted in some literature.

Overall, according to Edwards (2017a), it is possible to "refine and refashion" relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency and apply them in different kinds of settings. This study applies these concepts as a lens to view the relational aspects of

the participants' work as MECTs. The importance of mentoring and support for the participants, including across institutions, is also analysed within a relational framework.

3.5 Conclusion

Cultural-historical theory and Hedegaard's (2009) wholeness approach have been introduced in this chapter as the guiding framework for the study. The selection of the theoretical framework enables a holistic analysis of MECT experiences covering different perspectives—societal, institutional, personal. By applying Edwards's concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (2005, 2011), my research aims to understand how MECTs work relationally within and across different institutions. The next chapter elaborates on how the theoretical framework has influenced the methodology.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the qualitative research methodology is described and justified in relation to the cultural-historical approach. The research design for studying the personal and professional experiences of MECTs, details of the participants, and the tools and techniques for data collection are outlined. The data analysis approach is explained, alongside ethical considerations. Potential issues and questions are addressed about the validity of cultural-historical research.

4.2 Cultural-Historical Research Approach

Cultural-historical research is understood as a dialectical-interactive approach (Hedegaard, 2008b). The perspectives and experiences of an individual are linked to practice traditions of institutions and the wider societal context as part of a wholeness approach that "takes into account multi-dimensional elements of…participation in everyday life" (Hedegaard, 2008b, p. 30). From an epistemological standpoint, activity or practice of individuals is seen as the key point of interest and basis of knowledge (Hedegaard, 2008b). A cultural-historical approach to research is also valuable because of the focus on "taking the perspective of the actor, whether child or adult" (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019, p. 9). In the context of my study, this research approach was selected to enable a deeper understanding of relationships, experiences and perspectives of MECTs as they participate in society and in other institutions, as part of an examination of the dialectical relationship between the individual and their environment. In this way, new understandings can be developed.

Additionally, a dialectical-interactive research approach recognises the researcher's own perspective as important, alongside that of research participants (Fleer, 2008; Ridgway et al., 2020). Researchers become part of the everyday practices of the participants through interactions, whilst also attributing meaning to them related to the objectives of the study

(Hedegaard, 2008b). Although I did not meet the participants in person, or observe them in their ECEC centre environment, due to COVID-19 and trying to keep the data manageable, the data collection process and methods still provided significant insights into their everyday practices. I paid close attention to the perspectives of my participants as MECTs, as well as being cognisant of my own viewpoint related to the need to increase men's engagement in early childhood. My perspective informed choices made in relation to the research topic and aims, the questions I asked and my interactions with the participants.

4.3 Qualitative Research Methodology

Similar to other contemporary cultural-historical studies (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Li, 2014; Ridgway et al., 2020), a qualitative methodology for data collection was adopted for my study. Qualitative research emphasises studying individuals in their natural settings and seeks a meaningful understanding of the experiences, actions and interactions of people as they construct their world (Flick, 2007). The decision to use a qualitative methodology was based on the recognition that my presence in the research would not be neutral. More broadly, a qualitative research design had the benefit of developing a complex and nuanced understanding of MECT experiences that could not be captured through quantitative research. Furthermore, this type of research matches my skills and experience from my work with PI.

Many researchers have utilised a qualitative approach to investigate experiences of MECTs. These studies have collected data from men studying to be preschool teachers, early and late career teachers and childcare workers through a range of methods. Interviews (Bhana & Moosa, 2015), focus group discussions (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008), observations, video and photo data (Brody, 2015; Nentwich et al., 2013), and case studies (Warin, 2019) have all been established as qualitative research techniques to document and produce insights into MECTs. Alternatively, studies using quantitative research techniques such as surveys have also contributed to knowledge about men teachers (Olsen & Smeplass, 2018; Sak et al.,

2019). For this study, a qualitative methodology using interviews and artefacts within a cultural-historical wholeness approach, provides a compatible layered analysis through helping to build a holistic picture of everyday practices and pedagogy of MECTs from societal, institutional and personal perspectives.

4.4 Sampling, Participant Recruitment and Profile

Before commencing participant recruitment, the study received approval by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 28538, see Appendices A, B and C). Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, was used to ensure that the participants sampled were relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016). The specific purposive sampling approach I used to identify research participants was snowball sampling, whereby initially sampled people can propose other participants. I contacted people I knew who worked in early childhood, or knew someone who did, and posted a call for research participants on Facebook. Through this process, I found four MECTs who work with children aged under five years. One participant connected me directly to another, as they had worked together for a short time. I recognise the sample cannot be representative of all MECTs, which is a general limitation of snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016).

Another key consideration for my sampling approach was that the sample size needed to be manageable in terms of my time and resources, and so I decided to identify between four to six potential participants. Importantly, I wanted to be able to undertake an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. I could do that more effectively with a small sample size. In many examples of cultural-historical research, the sample sizes are small (see Edwards & Chan et al., 2019; Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Li & Fleer, 2015). Table 4.1 provides information about all participants in this study.

Table 4.1

Research Participant Profiles

Participant (pseudonym)	Age	Nationality	Background and qualifications	ECEC settings
Geoff	34	Australian	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care, Melbourne. Started working full-time in ECEC in 2008.	Not-for-profit co-operative childcare centre and kindergarten in suburban Melbourne. Works in baby, toddler and pre-kinder rooms, primarily as room leader.
Hu	31	Chinese	Master Degree of Moving Image (screen studies), China. Master of Teaching in Early Childhood, Melbourne. Started working full-time in ECEC in 2020.	For-profit childcare centre and kindergarten in rural Victoria. Full-time Early Childhood Teacher in a kindergarten program.
Matt	50	Australian	Completed a real estate course, also worked in banks. Certificate 3 in Early Childhood, Melbourne. Started working as a casual teacher in ECEC in 2016.	Local council-managed childcare centres and sessional kindergarten in suburban Melbourne. Works in baby and toddler room and as a sessional 3-year-old kindergarten teacher.
Simon	42	Taiwanese	Studied video and fashion design in Taiwan. Master of Fashion, Melbourne. Master of Teaching in Early Childhood, Melbourne. Started working full-time in ECEC in 2019.	For-profit childcare centre and kindergarten in rural Victoria. Full-time Early Childhood Teacher in pre-kinder room.

All research participants identify as men—understood in this study as their personal understanding of their gender identity and expression. This does not discount the existence of LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse or gender non-conforming teachers, nor the importance of challenging gender binary thinking in ECEC and beyond. I also understand that the participants have intersecting identities. More broadly, intersectionality can relate to, for example, ethnicity and cultural background, age, religion, class and sexuality. However, the intersectional identities of the participants were not considered, including because of a need to contain the breadth of the study. The participants' experiences specifically as men were of interest, and therefore the study focus.

4.5 Research Method: Semi-Structured Interviews and Artefacts

Data for this research were collected using two different methods—semi-structured interviews and participants' sharing of artefacts. In addition to COVID-19 related restrictions, time and resource limitations, my focus was on the personal and professional experiences of the participants, not their interactions with children. The primary research method was semi-structured interviews with individual participants. These were pre-arranged at a mutually convenient time, conducted via Zoom and recorded. In advance of the interviews, the participants received some information outlining the key content to be covered during the interview, as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Areas Covered in Interviews

Perspective	Examples
Demographic information	Age, education, qualifications, years of teaching experience.
Personal perspective	Life journey/experiences; influences; aspirations; motives; skills and qualities; discussion of personal artefacts.
Institutional perspective	Culture and philosophy of ECEC setting; everyday practices; responsibilities; expectations; addressing challenges and supporting others; collaboration; pedagogical goals and practices; example activities with children; discussion of classroom photos.
Societal perspective	Perceptions/expectations of, and attitudes towards, men teachers in ECEC.

Interview questions were prepared in advance to ensure consistency across data sets (see Appendix D), but the interview structure was kept fluid, to make it more natural and informal. As explained by Hviid (2008), interviews are "more than questions and answers, but rather shared knowledge construction and deconstruction while dialoguing" (p. 140). For example, depending on the direction of the discussion with each research participant, the order of questions was changed, or additional or reworked questions were asked in order to prompt further reflection.

Semi-Structured Interviews From a Theoretical Perspective. Interviewing in a dialectical-interactive approach requires the researcher and participant enter each other's activity setting and act as communication partners (Hedegaard, 2008b). Interviews provide an opportunity for the researcher to learn about what is important to a particular participant, gain an insight into their feelings and thoughts, and understand what challenges or issues they may face (Bang & Hedegaard, 2008). Interview responses in this study are also suggestive of relational expertise and common knowledge, as well as relational agency.

Additionally, participants were asked to bring personal and pedagogical artefacts to complement the semi-structured interviews:

i) personal artefacts with meaning for their life to discuss personal perspectives.

ii) pedagogical artefacts in the form of classroom photos (without identifiable children) to discuss personal perspectives and institutional practices within the ECEC setting. Visual data, including photos, are considered an effective supplement to enhance researcher understanding of participant perspectives through artefacts being a stimulus for discussion (Li, 2014). Artefacts are tools that support interpretation of the issues and experiences of participants being studied (File et al., 2016). I discovered that participant sharing of artefacts created space for deeper reflection on how personal and professional experiences, as well as engagement with different institutions (including the family), influenced their professional practices and pedagogical preferences.

Artefacts From a Theoretical Perspective. Collection of artefacts is common in qualitative research, including in ECEC. As argued by Li (2014), visual methodology can be framed by cultural-historical theory and the wholeness approach, to help build an understanding of participant perspectives on everyday practices. In Li's study (2014), a visual methodology that included photos and videos provided data for analysis of everyday family practices, including communication and interaction between parents and children in the home context. In this way, visual data can be understood conceptually to enhance understanding and address research questions (Li, 2014). Asking participants to share and discuss their personal and pedagogical artefacts as part of data collection augmented the semi-structured interviews, supported interpretation of the perspectives of individual participants, and the thematic synthesis of data.

The generation of data took place between October and December, 2021. Table 4.3 details data generated from interviews and artefacts.

Table 4.3

Generation of Data

Participant (pseudonym)	Semi-structured interview duration	Number of personal artefacts	Number of pedagogical artefacts
Geoff	1 hour 40 minutes	11	13
Hu	1 hour 40 minutes	8	5
Matt	1 hour 35 minutes	6	6
Simon	1 hour 45 minutes	3	15
Total	6 hours 40 minutes	28	39

Quotes used in the following chapters from interview data are verbatim quotes, with no alterations to correct syntax or grammar.

4.6 Data Analysis and Research Protocols

4.6.1 Planes of Analysis

In this study, the planes of analysis have been used to conceptualise the relationships between societal, institutional and personal perspectives (Hedegaard, 2012a). Unpacking the everyday life and experiences of MECTs across the planes of analysis builds upon Vygotsky whereby the participant's autonomy is shaped by the history, society and culture around them, looking backwards and forwards in time (Smagorinsky, 2010). In the case of my study, the planes of analysis enable: the putting of MECT perspectives and motives in the foreground; an understanding of how they negotiate or navigate different practice traditions and demands of institutions; and an analysis of how wider society has influenced their life and experiences related to work in ECEC. Table 4.4 summarises how each plane relates to the research area of MECTs.

Table 4.4

Planes of Analysis for Men Early Childhood Teachers

Perspective	Process	Dynamic	Men teachers in ECEC
Society	Societal traditions, values and norms.	Societal needs/conditions.	Understanding societal positioning of men early childhood teachers from the perspective of the participants (low status, low pay, men not allowed to change nappies in some settings).
Institution	Practice demands.	Practice traditions, values and beliefs. Potential for relational expertise, common knowledge.	Participation across institutions and within settings (collaboration and problem-solving through teamwork, mentoring and professional networks).
Person	Individual actions, learning.	Individual motives, values, orientations. Potential for relational agency.	Life experiences and influences (previous careers, family, sport and the arts and influence on career choice, relationships and pedagogy).

Note: Adapted from Hedegaard (2012a).

Furthermore, the planes of analysis guide both my focus on particular individuals or institutional practices, and enable an exploration of the interrelationships through a vertical examination of each plane (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019).

4.6.2 Levels of Data Interpretation

A dialectical-interactive research approach has different levels of data interpretation and organisation: common sense, situated practice and thematic interpretation (Hedegaard, 2008c). Levels of analysis enhance understanding of research participant and researcher perspectives. The cultural-historical research approach uses thematic analysis without using coding. In the process of data analysis, I applied the three levels of data interpretation as equivalent to interrelated steps, with each step informing the other.

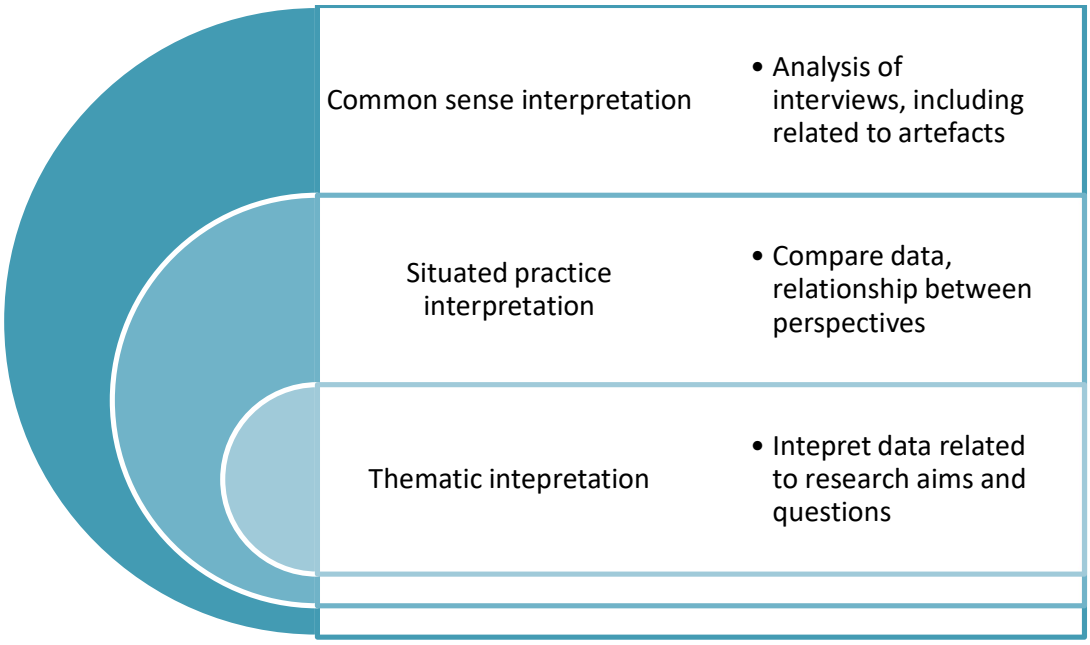
Common Sense Interpretation. The first level of analysis identified what was happening through initial impressions both at the time of data collection and shortly thereafter. My understanding as a researcher contributed to interpretation of data (Li, 2014). Explicit concepts were not required for this early stage of data analysis (Hedegaard, 2008c). The subjective experience of MECTs was at the forefront of initial analysis of interviews, including discussion of personal and pedagogical artefacts (Flick, 2013), reflecting the personal perspective and common sense interpretation of Hedegaard's approach. The focus was on what participants said in relation to their artefacts, not the actual artefacts themselves. When analysing each individual transcript, I used colour coding to highlight interesting sections and added comments to document my initial response, understandings and reflections. I began to look for similarities or differences between the participants.

Situated Practice Interpretation. The next level of analysis focused on key theoretical concepts and patterns across different settings (Liang, 2014; Pennay, 2014). The aim was to develop "new insights both in the concrete analysis and the formulation of the general concepts" (Hedegaard, 2008c, p. 58). In my study, situated practice interpretation supported identification of connections, relationships and themes within the data through a focus on perspectives and experiences of the participants. I created a table for analysis relating to societal, institutional and personal perspectives where I included relevant quotes from the transcript of each participant and began to identify conceptual patterns by analysing different practices, motives and interactions. For example, at this stage I identified themes in relation to being men teachers and different forms of collaboration with others. Through continuing to explore initial themes and patterns, I also identified sub-themes. These included perspectives on differences between genders and participation across varied institutions (Chapters 5 and 6).

Thematic Level Interpretation. This level of analysis helped me to consolidate an understanding of the intersection between the societal, institutional and personal perspectives to both reduce the amount of material used and address the research questions and aims (Hedegaard, 2008c). I created a table to condense and classify the findings and sub-findings under the different perspectives, including in relation to existing literature (see Appendix E). Identification of major concepts in the data emerged through this process, such as a focus on the ways societal and institutional practices and demands were mediated by individuals (Hedegaard, 2008c), including in relation to development of motives and dealing with tensions. Furthermore, the thematic interpretation has informed the structure and content of Chapter 7**.** Figure 4.1 provides a summary of these different levels of data interpretation, and how each has been used to analyse data in this study.

Figure 4.1

Three Levels of Data Interpretation



Note: Adapted from Hedegaard (2008c).

I decided to use the three levels of data interpretation because they provided me with a methodical yet iterative approach to building understanding of my data through the different stages of analysis. This approach also aligned with my overall cultural-historical research methodology.

4.7 Validity of the Research

In cultural-historical research, the intention is not to triangulate data or establish validity through comparing different experimental groups. Instead, the aim is to reveal various aspects of what is being examined (Rai, 2019), including the everyday life of an individual (Hedegaard, 2008c). In dialectic-interactive research, content and methods define each other (Hedegaard, 2008b). Research design is validated and dependent upon how well different perspectives of participants are captured over time. Fleer (2008) explains how

validity is “gained through the act of analysing all the perspectives of the participants—their motives, projects and goals” (p. 87). Revealing different aspects of the participants’ everyday lives is therefore important (Hedegaard, 2008c). In order to capture the participants’ different perspectives in my research, the semi-structured interview data was complemented by discussion about personal and pedagogical artefacts, providing a window into everyday practices, including across different institutions. Gaining a broader picture into the participants’ lives across institutional practices and experiences provided valuable insights into their motives and goals to add validity to my research.

Additionally, research reliability is important. In a dialectical-interactive research approach, this can be achieved through “distinguishing between the researcher’s perspective and the researched person’s perspectives” (Hedegaard, 2008b, p. 43). Interactions between the researcher and the researched can take different forms, most significantly the researcher imposes views in their research design and aims. Through distinguishing between the theoretical understanding, motives and goals of myself as the researcher and how these are different to the motives and intentions of the participants, it is possible to establish reliable research (Hedegaard, 2008b). In this study, my research goal relates to understanding the personal and professional experiences of the four participants from societal, institutional and personal perspectives. For each individual, participating in an interview and discussion of artefacts was motivated by a willingness to share their experience as MECTs.

Ultimately, it is not the aim of my research to develop findings that can be generalised. Instead, the intention is to offer new insights into the personal and professional experiences of MECTs. These findings may also have implications for how to support and retain men teachers in the early childhood profession.

4.8 Research Ethics

Ethical considerations have been part of every stage of this research and relate to having both ethical processes and ethical outcomes (Calder, 2020). Given the focus of my research on personal and professional perspectives and experiences, I was transparent about the purpose of my study with the research participants prior to the interviews. Transparent communication about research methodology and aims was used to both limit potential harm and ensure informed consent (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2007). A consent form (see Appendix B) was shared with all participants and signed. Each participant was provided with an explanatory statement (see Appendix C) that included a description of the research, possible risks to the participants and a commitment to data confidentiality. Participants were informed that all identifying information would be removed from personal and pedagogical artefacts. I recognised that as the participants were sourced through existing contacts and social media (Facebook), and were part of an overall small cohort of men who work in ECEC in Victoria, there was a risk of their identity being exposed. Use of a pseudonym was one solution. Additionally, the research participant profile information was an attempt to balance relevant information and confidentiality. In the case of any future publication of research results, the participants will be informed and additional care taken to protect their identities. This may include changing references to their cultural identity and background. The data collection complies with Monash University policy by keeping it in a secure location, using de-identified data in this thesis, and a commitment to the original data being destroyed.

Part of being an ethical researcher means being cognisant of my own beliefs and assumptions (Bryman, 2016). As outlined in Chapter 1, the research area of MECTs, their life course and experience in ECEC settings was chosen because of the relevance to my work at PI. This means the research is not free of my personal values or biases. I am aware that I have a particular cultural, social and professional background that frames who I am as a person and

a researcher. My pronouns are she/her, and I am also conscious of this, given I am exploring men's experiences. I further acknowledge my own bias and subjectivity as one limitation of this research in Chapter 8.

Nonetheless, through self-reflection about the influences on this research design and process of data collection and interpretation, the aim has been a reflexive approach that accounts for my perspective as a researcher (Bryman, 2016; Carter, 1993). In practice, this has involved self-reflection and being careful not to make assumptions about the experiences of my participants, particularly in relation to gender, which is a big focus of my professional work. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) have questioned methodologies used to research men in ECEC, finding that researcher bias was evident, particularly related to gender. One suggestion made was to have a gender-balanced research team, which was not possible for a student thesis. Instead, my research design sought to understand participant experiences guided by the cultural-historical wholeness approach that considers everyday lives, social settings, cultural and historical factors to avoid an exclusively gender lens for analysis. Within this research framing, I could recognise that the participant's everyday practices may be related to their gender, experience of gender, or wider norms and stereotypes that exist in society today, but equally so, may not be.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical basis for my research design and methodology. Decisions on sampling and methods have been explained, including a need to contain the scope of the research. I have discussed how data analysis and interpretation methodology, as well as considerations for valid research, have been grounded in a cultural-historical approach. Finally, my personal commitment to ethical research practice has been explained. The next chapter describes the key findings and sub-findings of my research based

on thematic analysis of the data, using the three levels of data interpretation and planes of analysis that have been described in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Influences on Everyday Practices of Men Early Childhood Teachers

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings related to the first research question: *How do the personal and professional experiences of early childhood teachers identifying as men influence their everyday pedagogical practices?* Data from all four participants demonstrates how their life experiences have informed their decision to work in ECEC. Additionally, pedagogy is shaped by their experiences. Two key interrelated findings emerge from the data analysis:

1) A relationship exists between personal life, career choice and professional pedagogy.
2) Being men teachers influences everyday pedagogical practices.

The next two sections explore the connection between each participant's personal and professional experiences and their journey in ECEC.

5.2 Relationship Between Personal Life, Career Choice and Professional Pedagogy

5.2.1 Personal Experiences and Career Choice

The four research participants, Simon, Matt, Geoff and Hu, discussed how life experiences had influenced their decision to become ECTs. Firstly, the participants evaluated their skills, strengths and interests. Additionally, they reflected on what was important to them at the particular stage of their life, when they decided to study and work in ECEC.

The desire to find a sustainable long-term career that offered a good work-life balance was significant for Matt, Simon and Hu. Simon explained how dissatisfaction with his previous work in the fashion industry and his age were factors, noting "because my age is quite old, I was thinking I need to prepare different skills and not only focus on [the] fashion industry…the pace is really fast and so stressful." Like Simon, Matt was attracted to ECEC later in life. After completing his schooling, Matt spent long hours commuting from home into the city to work in real estate and banking. His wife was concerned that this life was not

suited to him, “my wife said, ‘I don’t think you’re that happy doing that…you get up early it’s dark, you go to work, you get home, it’s dark, you’re not really playing sport like you used to.’” Matt subsequently reflected on the advantages of a career in ECEC, “it’s never too long hours…and so there’s positives with family life and your own sport and commitments…” Hu had similar motivations of needing to find an alternative career. He experienced challenges finding work with qualifications in film and screen studies. He stated, “just within my own industry, if I work in film…in the entertainment industry, it’s really hard to find a stable job, both here [in Australia] or in China as well.” The data revealed how previous work experiences prompted the career changes of Simon, Matt and Hu. They viewed the ECEC sector as having the potential to offer them greater satisfaction and stability than their former careers.

Another reason Hu, Simon and Matt chose ECEC was the perception they could leverage transferable skills to work as teachers. Hu felt confident he could succeed in the profession, “even though I came from quite a different background, like film, the philosophies, pedagogical framework, and the structure are pretty much similar.” Matt shared his experience working in after school sports programs during his youth, “you’d go to primary schools and high schools after school and you’d take [students] for a game of cricket, football, whatever. You’d teach them some skills and you’d have fun…” At the time, Matt did not think about this kind of work as a potential career. However, he later recognised ECEC as “an extension” of what he enjoyed, that drew on his interests and talents. Simon reflected on how being creative and developing “new fashion[s], new product[s]” during his work in the fashion industry were transferable skills for ECEC, “the way I am picturing [experiences and activities for children] is quite different compared with my co-workers.” The change to teaching from other industries builds on existing personal and professional skills and interests of these three participants.

Respect for teaching as a profession and the teaching experiences of family members were cited by Simon, Hu and Geoff as another reason for their interest in education. Prior to his work in ECEC, Hu was familiar with the work of teachers and noted, "I come from a teaching family…half of my family members are teachers." As an outlier, Geoff is the only participant educated as an ECT immediately after completing high school. He reflected on favourable memories of kindergarten, including of his teachers, "it was a beautiful environment and a beautiful community that the [kindergarten teachers] fostered…growing up, [my kindergarten] was always a safe space, and always somewhere I was welcome…it was like a second home." Geoff now hoped that as a teacher, he is leaving "those same kind of impressions" on children he works with. Finally, for Simon, his cultural background was relevant to his decision-making. He shared his parents' response to his career change, "they [are] really happy I am working in a childcare centre. You know, Asian parents, they love their kids to be a teacher, a lawyer, an accountant, this kind of job." Through these accounts, it emerges that positive views towards teaching and teachers through personal experiences has influenced the career selection of the three participants.

Finally, prior experience with children was a key factor informing Simon and Matt's decision to work in ECEC. Although Simon previously had limited contact with young children, he explained that, more recently, he had established a bond with his young nephews, "…every single time I was teaching drawing and other things to my two nephews…I feel so happy…that's why I chose to teach kids." As the only participant with children of his own, Matt had significant experience with children. When his children were young, he was a "stay-at-home Dad." He explained, "my wife was still working full time and [so] I assisted there and that was nice…I became the father at home." He also reflected, "I'd always coached [sport], and had an affinity with younger children." He considered the significance of his experience as a father and coach: "in hindsight, it's probably pretty obvious that I've come to

this [work in ECEC].” For Simon and Matt, the enjoyment of spending time with children in their personal lives prompted a career change to ECEC. Table 5.1 summarises the key findings of this section.

Table 5.1

Personal Experiences and Career Choice

Key Finding	Evidence
Personal life and experiences influenced career choice.	Influences on decision to become early childhood teachers:
	Positive experiences of previous education (Geoff).
	Family teaching background (Geoff, Hu).
	Respect for profession of teaching (Geoff, Simon, Hu).
	Desire for career change (Simon, Matt, Hu) and sustainable career (all).
	Transferable skills (Matt, Simon, Hu).
	Experience with children (Matt, Simon).

Overall, despite the participants' varied pathways into the ECEC profession, they can pinpoint specific personal and professional experiences that influenced their choice to pursue a career as teachers. More broadly, this demonstrates the way personal experiences intersect with professional lives and choices in ECEC. Each participant's life experience further influenced their everyday teaching practices.

5.2.2 Personal Experiences and Individual Pedagogy

As well as impacting on the choice to become an ECT, each participant's life experience is relevant to pedagogy. This includes pedagogical preferences, interactions with children and other staff, and the participants' choice of materials to promote learning through play. The discussion of personal and pedagogical artefacts shared by Simon, Matt, Geoff and Hu highlights the link between their personal lives and pedagogy.

The personal and pedagogical artefacts chosen by Matt, Geoff and Hu demonstrated how their participation in sport and outdoor physical activity had been inspiration for some of their ECEC work. Matt indicated he liked engaging children in physical, gross motor and outdoor activities. His choice to share photos of the outdoor space at his ECEC centre, as well as an image of him as a premiership coach (Figure 5.1) is notable. Matt emphasised how he encouraged play such as kicking a football, pushing children on the swing, and playing in the sandpit. Like Matt, Hu focused on how he encouraged children in active and outdoor play, and how he personally enjoyed outdoor activities. He participated in sports, particularly soccer (Figure 5.2). Likewise, Geoff also appreciated being outside, especially going to the beach and venturing on nature walks. For him, this contributed to a love of nature pedagogy, including the use of natural resources such as leaves, rocks, sticks and seeds when setting up play experiences. Geoff appreciated the outdoor space at his centre where he encouraged children to climb trees and play with mud and water (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.1

Matt: Sport and Outdoor Activities—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact
		

Figure 5.2

Hu: Sport and Outdoor Activities—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact


Figure 5.3

Geoff: Sport and Outdoor Activities—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact
	

Through sharing and discussing personal and pedagogical artefacts, connections are made between personal experiences and participants' professional practice.

Another personal preference reported by Simon and Hu that influenced pedagogical choices is a love of food and cooking. For example, Simon's discussion of a photo of a favourite weekend egg and noodle dish illustrates how his personal love of cooking, including with his partner who was a chef, influenced his pedagogy. Simon set up a home corner in his pre-kinder room with Asian food (plastic sushi) to promote learning about food in Asian cultures (Figure 5.4). Hu also stated that cooking at home, family mealtimes, and replicating dishes from his childhood was important to him. This personal interest can be seen reflected in his pedagogy with the example of planting a vegetable garden as a science activity about growing food from seeds at his ECEC centre. He encouraged parents to take harvested vegetables home to prepare meals and eat as a family activity (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.4

Simon: Cooking and Healthy Eating—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact
		

Figure 5.5

Hu: Cooking and Healthy Eating—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact
		

These select artefacts Simon and Hu chose to disclose illustrate the connection between their personal and professional lives.

Finally, Geoff, Simon and Hu discussed the importance of music and creativity in their lives. Geoff stated a lifelong love of playing and listening to music. He expressed his passion for music by sharing how he left a guitar at his workplace so he can sing songs with the children (Figure 5.6). Hu also played the guitar, something he enjoyed doing personally and in his professional role with children (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.6

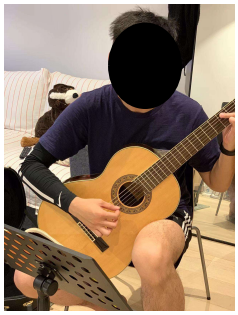
Geoff: Art and Music—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact	Personal Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact	Pedagogical Artefact
			

Figure 5.7

Hu: Music—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Personal Artefact



Simon and Geoff have a strong interest in art in common that influenced the types of art activities and materials they organised for children to experience. Geoff organised art activities to replicate his favourite artwork and artists in his role as a teacher (Figure 5.6). Simon took particular pride in the art and craft corner and commented that he enjoyed preparing diverse materials for the children, including crayons, scissors, paper and coloured pencils (Figure 5.8). He noted how his creativity, love of drawing from a young age and experience in the fashion industry helped to influence these pedagogical choices.

Figure 5.8

Simon: Art—From Personal Life to Pedagogy

Pedagogical Artefact

Overall, artefacts shared by participants, alongside interview data, exemplifies the importance of personal experiences and pursuits for Simon, Geoff, Matt and Hu. These influence their choices, everyday practices and pedagogy in the early childhood classroom. Table 5.2 provides a summary of this finding.

Table 5.2

Personal Experiences and Pedagogy

Key Finding	Evidence
Personal life and experiences informed pedagogical practices and preferences.	Life experience and influence on pedagogy:
	Playing sport/coaching, being outside, enjoyment of nature = active, outdoor play (Matt, Hu, Geoff). Creative expression and enjoyment of art = art corner and materials (Simon, Geoff). Enjoyment of food and cooking = growing seeds, harvesting plants, promotion of healthy eating, Asian foods (Simon, Hu). Enjoyment of music/playing guitar = singing, playing music with children (Geoff, Hu).

In summary, an analysis of the interviews demonstrates how the personal and professional choices of MECTs are interwoven and interlinked. According to participants, their personal experiences and interests in sport, outdoor activities, food, cooking, music and art informs their pedagogical choices in the classroom. The next section examines how gendered norms and expectations influence each participant's experiences and pedagogy.

5.3 Experiencing Being Men Teachers

5.3.1 The Intersection of Societal Assumptions and Experiences in Early Childhood Education and Care

The interview process explored the participants' perceptions of societal assumptions and beliefs about MECTs in ECEC settings, and experiences of some of these attitudes in

interactions with colleagues and parents. The participant discussion included awareness of stereotypes concerning women being best able to educate and take care of young children; and reflections on the influence of culture, traditions and the norms held within a society, including the undervaluing of ECEC. Furthermore, the analysis extends to how this influences the participants' agency and everyday practices as MECTs.

The participants recognised that ECEC is generally not widely valued in society. A common thread in the interviews was around low wages and the lack of understanding by people outside of the profession about what employment as an ECT involved. A representative comment by Hu showed the low value attributed to ECEC: "people still think this is very much like babysitting…people don't think it's very important." In addition, Matt described the way the sector is considered better suited towards women in terms of "stereotypes" and "tradition." Matt stated: "it's just thinking that's more of a women's profession than a males." Similarly, Hu reflected, "people [never think] of some male working with children." Two participants also discussed how these perceptions of MECTs had placed limitations on them.

Stereotypes about who should work in ECEC occasionally manifested as distrust of men teachers. Simon and Geoff both discussed how they had been told that men were not allowed to change nappies in employment interviews at some ECEC centres. Both men joked about being happy not to do nappy-changing, but also expressed concern because participating in this work was an essential part of their job. Simon explained, "we are professional teachers and [they] don't let us do our job properly, what is the point about that?" Similarly, Geoff stated, "if you feel someone is safe enough to be around your children, then it makes no sense to say that you can't [change nappies]." Both Simon and Geoff reflected on generalised parental fears perhaps being due to media reporting about child abuse and stereotypes they may hold, although they did not recall specific cases. Geoff

stated: “I do remember news reports…about sexual abuse of children, especially young ones, being around…so there was a little bit of concern in the media [about men working with children].” Both Geoff and Hu were cognisant of a particular mindset about the suitability of men in ECEC and concerns around sexual abuse of children. However, they still believed that preventing men from changing nappies, as an everyday practice in ECEC, did not make sense.

Another example of how societal norms and values influenced how men teachers were perceived related to being a role model in ECEC. Simon and Hu reported how colleagues and parents valued them as a “male role model” (Simon), and “a male figure in this industry” (Hu). Simon noted his co-workers “expect I can bring something different,” whilst Hu recalled parents telling him that “having a male teacher is very important [for their children].” These statements, however, are vague in terms of expectations of a male role model and what this could mean in practice. Nonetheless, these participants understood that being men teachers carried with it external expectations about what they should contribute to ECEC.

One way the study participants negotiated stereotypes in their workplace was by using humour in interactions, which is also suggestive of their agency. According to the participants’ descriptions, humour was sometimes used to subvert traditional gender roles and norms. Matt shared how he joked about his relationship with women colleagues, “they love [it] …the ladies, that I call them boss.” Hu also recounted two stories. His first story was from a training placement: “the female educator observed me, she said, ‘oh Hu, you’re quite domestic (laughs).’” Secondly, a manager teased Hu when he could not find something,

> My (female) manager would just joke with me and say ‘have a girl’s look’ which is very funny for me actually. Like a gender sort of joke, but I get the sense of

> humour…by just mocking me as a male, it's their way of accepting me and welcoming me.

Humour seems to be a social tool for acknowledgement and acceptance. The influence of stereotypical gender roles on how men teachers perceive themselves and their women colleagues is an aspect of everyday practices and interactions.

Finally, despite some negative effects of gender stereotypes as MECTs, all the participants expressed that they are appreciated by their women colleagues and parents, as men working in ECEC. Matt stated, "I couldn't have asked for more acceptance wise. You know, if anything, all I hear is 'wouldn't it be great if we had more [men].'" Similarly, Geoff explained, "I have only ever had positive reactions from families, co-workers and students...And I feel like I'm probably more likely to be asked, 'why did you get into this?', not in terms of a judgement, but out of genuine interest." Ultimately, the support received as MECTs in their ECEC settings is highly valued by all participants. These findings are summarised in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3

Societal Stereotypes and Experiences in ECEC

Key Finding	Evidence
	Intersection of societal stereotypes and experiences in ECEC settings:
Experiencing being men teachers	Low value placed on ECEC (all). ECEC perceived as a profession for women (Matt, Hu, Geoff). Distrust about motivations and suitability of men teachers in ECEC are held in society (nappy changing) (Simon, Geoff). Male role model (Hu, Simon). Use of humour to address stereotypes about women and men in ECEC (all). Recognise acceptance as men, appreciation of men's presence and desire for more men ECTs by colleagues/parents (all).

Overall, Simon, Geoff, Matt and Hu are conscious of beliefs and perceptions about ECEC and men who work in the sector—from the wider society, colleagues and parents. However, they all express overwhelmingly positive experiences as men teachers. The next section focuses on the participants' personal perspectives related to their professional lives specifically as MECTs.

5.3.2 Personal Perspectives on Men and Women Early Childhood Teachers

All participants reported both similarities and differences between men and women working in ECEC. Despite participants stating that they carried out the same work and care as their women colleagues (except nappy changing in several ECEC centres), the participants articulated some distinctions in their everyday practices. Examples of gendered practices are provided particularly in terms of play and discipline.

Participants stated that women and men shared all aspects of ECEC work. In that sense, participants inferred they completed the same work. This is exemplified by Matt's

description: “roles and responsibilities, we’re all there to do the same…I think I can do whatever the ladies can do and vice versa.” Geoff also emphasised how care of children was central to his work. He stated, “the main thing about early childhood is, ‘Is my child cared for? Do you know them? Will you look after them when things go wrong? And are they happy? Are they learning?’” Geoff further suggested that gender was not of concern, as long as the children’s needs were being met, “What your gender is doesn’t come into that if [families] feel that those major things are there…nothing else really matters to most families.” These statements support the idea that gender is not central to their everyday practices or professional work. Yet, the interview data also contradicts claims of gender neutrality, with evidence of differences between men and women teachers in relation to play pedagogy, managing conflict, and advice given to new workers entering the sector.

Firstly, the participants indicated they had distinct play styles with children. Simon, Geoff, Matt, and Hu all emphasised their preference for active play and sports as something different from their women colleagues. Simon reflected that, “sometimes I feel my female co-workers, they overthinking too much. But males, say, ‘it’s ok, just let [children] play.’ We don’t have to worry about it if they get wet or something.” Similarly, Hu noted, “Most of the time, I have been the active one with children, playing active sports with them—chasing, running, do all kinds of gymnastics.” Another difference related to the participants’ perceived ability to manage children when they become physically aggressive. Matt stated how, “sometimes for a few of the ladies, it’s got a bit much when some kids are throwing something or biting…and I’ve just been lucky enough to be there and to get in and hopefully quell the situation.” Geoff also emphasised his physical presence when children showed anger, “I’m not exactly a little man, so I’m not so worried about me.” These personal perspectives of MECTs on play and discipline appear to reflect traditional gendered expectations about men, and their roles in ECEC.

Another notable experience that emerged in the interviews was both neutral and gendered advice for novice teachers. General advice consisted of personal qualities and what was needed to be successful as ECTs such as: "you have to be patient" (Simon); "have a sense of humour…and a positive attitude" (Matt); "you're going to need passion" (Hu); and, "find yourself a good community to be involved in" (Geoff). However, the participants identified some additional advice specific to men teachers. Simon suggested, for example, that men should start working in the baby or toddler rooms,

> If you can handle changing nappies…and doing the very dirty things…and if you have enough patience to sit down and communicate with babies…and you can put them to sleep, and you can face all the challenges… Congratulations, as a male you are qualified!

Other advice the participants offered related to the importance of reaching out to people for support as men in the industry and not having preconceptions about what the sector and the work was like. The data suggested that all four participants recognised the importance of providing specific advice and support for men teachers in ECEC, as well as generalisable advice common to all ECTs.

Despite this articulation of some differences in everyday practices that subscribed to traditional gender norms, the participants also indicated they did not fit conventional ideas of men in ECEC, and may therefore be able to exercise their agency through showing other ways of being men. Geoff contributed a representative comment, "you're not doing anyone any favours by being the stereotypical tough bloke." Simon also explained his play style is "not very traditional." He provided an example: "for dramatic play, children put on costume like Cinderella or Elsa or something… and I will put Elsa dress on…(laughs)…and [children] say 'you're a boy, you're not a girl.' And I say, 'why not?'" Additionally, Matt explained how he negotiated disciplinary roles in gendered terms, but not always as the disciplinarian:

> there's always been a bit of a bad cop, good cop with myself and some of the other educators, which sort of works well, because, you know, it gets [the children] to do something. But I might [also] come in and be a bit softer [too].

The data suggests societal norms relating to expectations for men teachers influence everyday practices. The participants express how they are both the same as, and different to, their colleagues. Table 5.4 outlines these findings.

Table 5.4

Similarities and Differences between Women and Men in ECEC

Key Finding	Evidence
Being men teachers	Men and women ECTs are the same:
	Undertake the same tasks/have same responsibilities/same expectations on them (all). All are trained professionals (all). Would give the same advice (all).
	Men and women ECTs are different:
	Different approach to play (all). Different approach to discipline, ability to deal with children's physical behaviour (Geoff, Matt). Would give some different advice to men (all).
	Reinforcing and challenging gender stereotypes:
	Some stereotypical traits and behaviours for men (e.g. discipline, active play and sport, being outdoors) (all). Some atypical traits and behaviours for men that are indicative of agency (e.g. dressing up, being domestic, not being a tough bloke) (all).

Simon, Matt, Geoff and Hu share views and examples that indicate contradictory tendencies as men teachers. Through their everyday practices and interactions they both reinforce and challenge stereotypical gender norms and expectation. However, their overall flexible perspective on being men is indicative of their potential agency.

5.4 Conclusion

Findings presented in this chapter demonstrate the connection between personal and professional experiences, participants' career choice and their classroom pedagogy. Analysis from the interviews provides evidence that being men teachers influences the everyday practices of Simon, Geoff, Matt and Hu. Furthermore, they seem able to exercise their agency in ways suggestive of their commitments and preferences. The next chapter examines how the participants perceive and use reciprocal support and collaboration in ECEC, and other institutions, in their personal and professional lives.

Chapter 6: The Importance of Relationships and Collaboration for Men Early Childhood Teachers

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings in respect of the second research question: *How do early childhood teachers identifying as men perceive collaboration and reciprocal support across different institutional settings?* It explores how collaborative relationships enable participants to learn and develop in ECEC, as well as how participation in other institutions supports collaboration. In some sections, the inclusion of personal artefacts supplement findings from interview data. The findings are presented under two key headings:

1) Importance of professional relationships for collaboration.
2) Participation across institutions with influence on practice.

The next two sections analyse the benefits of collaborative practice, and complementary engagement with family, sport, and the arts for MECTs.

6.2 Importance of Professional Relationships for Collaboration

6.2.1 Teamwork

The overall finding in this section is an appreciation by all participants that working together, mutual support and cooperation with others is an essential part of ECEC. Geoff, Hu and Matt all considered engagement with mentors to be important. Additionally, Geoff and Hu valued professional networks as part of their collaborative practice. All these types of professional relationships open up possibilities of agency for MECTs.

Being part of a team and reciprocal support was an attractive aspect of the work in ECEC for all participants. One feature of successful teamwork included a willingness to assist co-workers. Matt explained, “You all have your strengths, and your weaknesses, I might have a strength in one area and [colleague/s] have a strength in another area, and you can help one another out.” Simon noted the importance of values such as honesty and good

communication, “If something happens, you just face it altogether…As long as you just tell [your colleagues] why and promise them you will fix later, everything will be ok.” Finally, Geoff reflected on the nature of ECEC when he stated, “it’s not solitary work, it really is a community and teamwork.” These comments demonstrate connections between colleagues and ways this is valued, how active collaboration is desirable, and the need for confidence and trust in others.

Additionally, all participants identified the importance of teamwork for problem-solving and sharing of different perspectives. Opportunities to consult with other team members for advice and direct help was appreciated. Simon made an illustrative comment, “If you are facing some issues, and you couldn’t solve the problem immediately, you just ask your co-workers...You can sit down and maybe you can find the solutions all together.” Hu stated that he initially felt more confident writing rather than verbalising his views: “[I wrote] my thoughts down and [shared] them [with colleagues] so we could discuss afterwards… [That] was working for me and helping others as well.” Similarly, Geoff spoke about his experience of collaboration, “we always try to balance out what you [as an individual] view as important versus what the team thinks is important and what families think is important.” In this example, willingness to compromise and understand the motives of others is considered to lead to positive outcomes for children. These examples also suggest their agency as teachers. Overall, consultation with colleagues, as well as with families, enhances collaboration, problem-solving and communication in ECEC settings.

Finally, all participants had some experience of working with other men teachers or volunteers and reported finding that useful. As Simon explained, “…sometimes males, we talk to each other…and exchange our ideas…And also I feel secure in my mind because I talk to male, can be more comfortable compared with ladies, because I worry if I say something this may offend them.” Geoff reflected on working with men colleagues: “It’s probably easier

at the start with men in some ways, like you go, 'no-one's going to misread anything [I say or do], I don't have to worry.'" The MECTs articulated the advantages of support from other men as being able to relate easily to men and share experiences. This reinforces the evidence that participants do perceive some differences between women and men.

6.2.2 Professional Networks

Geoff and Hu reported the valuable role of professional networks to their work as teachers. Professional networks included teacher communities of practice, as well as those related to specific educational philosophies, such as Reggio Emilia. These networks served multiple purposes, such as sharing resources and expertise, increasing motivation, and demonstrating a commitment to continued learning.

Geoff and Hu, who had worked together for a short time, noted that active involvement in professional networks was significant for finding inspiration and guidance. Hu discussed his involvement in professional networks, including a focus on receiving advice and connecting with like-minded colleagues. He explained how he became involved in a regional teacher's community of practice after moving to a rural area, and found the interactions useful, "people have given me lots of feedback and support." Geoff reflected on the benefits of being involved with different networks, "[I've realized] the importance of looking up and out a little bit further than just being in your own four walls, which can be really nice and really safe, but also, it's good to reach out and to be encouraged." For Geoff and Hu, professional networks are meaningful for further learning and building professional relationships in ECEC.

6.2.3 Mentoring

The data revealed mentoring is valued and important to Matt, Hu and Geoff. For Geoff and Hu, mentoring primarily occured formally through their ECEC settings. For Hu, being mentored was a defining feature of his work, "I think mentoring is probably the most

important thing for my career." This is exemplified by a scenario Hu discussed where he had differences around pedagogies with a (female) colleague that he did not feel able to address since he was only in his first year. Once he was fully registered as an ECT, a discussion with a (female) mentor about this issue led to the realisation by Hu that, "I had the power to stand up, and just speak not only for myself, but for the industry, for the team as well." For Matt, mentoring was more informal, "people I've worked with [in ECEC] have not been [formal] mentors but have done that without it being an actual title...there's been some really good people to learn from, just to pick their brains." Overall, the role of mentors seems to contribute to a growing sense of confidence for the MECTs in this study and to their unfolding agency in their ECEC work.

Finally, both Geoff and Hu reflected on the importance of mentoring for developing their identity as men teachers. Geoff shared that "as I've got older and more experienced, I'm less concerned [about perceptions of me as a MECT]…I have a lot of training, a lot of experience now, and a lot of mentoring…I view myself as an educator and teacher." Hu specifically valued having men mentors, "looking at how other male educators interact with children is very important." These observations on the advantages of mentoring for and by men suggests that mentoring for these participants shows potential as an enabler for collaboration and professional growth as MECTs. This is further demonstrated by the value that Geoff and Hu place on their mentor/mentee relationship. Hu shared challenges he faced with Geoff, and they discussed pedagogy. Geoff recalled, "probably my proudest mentoring moment has been, we [Hu and Geoff] got talking about nature pedagogy…So in the centre Hu is in, he's started a bush kinder program on his own." Although they do not explicitly relate the value of their relationship to both being MECTs, the data suggests that having men mentors may be important, just as working with other men colleagues was articulated as having some benefits. The findings of this section are depicted in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1

Teamwork, Professional Networks and Mentoring

Key Finding	Evidence
Importance of teamwork, professional networks and mentoring	Collaboration through teamwork:
	High value placed on teamwork including good communication, honesty, flexibility, reciprocal support (all).
	Useful for problem solving/addressing challenges/advice (all).
	Working with other men was valuable/comfortable, but did not specifically seek this out (all).
	Indicative of agency (all)
	Collaboration through mentoring and professional networks:
	Formal/organised networks and mentoring (Geoff, Hu).
	Informal mentoring from managers and more experienced colleagues (Matt, Geoff, Hu).
	Mentoring by and for men important (Geoff, Hu)
	Mentor/mentee relationship valuable (Geoff, Hu).
	Offered inspiration, advice, motivation, ongoing learning, practice improvement, professional growth (Geoff, Matt, Hu).
	Indicative of agency (Geoff, Matt, Hu)

In summary, different forms of collaboration (teamwork, professional networks and mentoring) are key features of participant practice in ways that suggest active engagement with others and the development of agency. The opportunity for consultation, sharing of advice and mutual learning is important. None of the participants have specifically sought support from other MECTs, but when that support exists, they find it beneficial.

6.3 Participation and Collaboration Across Different Institutions

6.3.1 Influence of Families on Participants' Practice

The overall finding in this section indicates that participants' engagement across other institutions such as in the immediate and extended family, sport and the arts is of value to their relationships and work in ECEC. Participants' reflections showed that external collaboration in diverse contexts was thought to improve their pedagogy as ECTs. There is further evidence in these findings to support the proposition that personal and professional experiences are important for career choice and everyday practices of MECTs.

Family was a key institution influencing the lives of all participants. Family was a common theme to the personal artefacts participants presented for the research interviews. All participants discussed positive memories of their families. A representative comment was put forward by Matt: "I was lucky enough to learn a lot from grandparents and parents…they were all very accepting of people and always promoting positive behaviour…so I've taken that and continue with that…in the workforce." All participants chose to share family photos (Figure 6.1), which demonstrated the significance of family in their lives.

Figure 6.1

Importance of Family

Simon (taking his parents on holiday)

Matt

Paul

Hu

Collaboration with their families was also important. In Matt's example, it was his wife who took the initiative to enrol him as a student, "she said to me, 'you're enrolled in a course [in early childhood]' and so I said (laughs), 'oh thank you'…we'd sort of spoken about it, you know, 'you'd be good with kids.'" For Geoff, both his wife and mother contributed to his thinking as a teacher. Geoff's mother worked in ECEC and shared her own experiences. He explained, "It's really nice to have workshop talks with Mum. We talk work, and we talk about different practices, different pedagogy…" Geoff also felt supported by his wife, and said, "She allows me to explore different things…so like coming along to the gallery and then we'll talk about how we can take that as an idea (to use in my work with

children).” Simon also recounted confiding in his partner about his work, “I always complain to my partner when something happens...” The evidence suggests that family members perform roles as collaborators, confidants and sources of support.

All participants similarly reported valuing families of children who attended the ECEC settings in which they worked. They made a special effort to reach out and connect with families, as demonstrated by two representative examples. Simon shared how he had a girl in his care who often cried and did not want to engage with him. His response was to talk with the girl’s mother to understand the family situation, “I sat down and have chat with parents because they are separated. Mummy is looking after this girl. So I just realised that something happened in her family…As soon as mummy told me this story…I really want to help her.” Geoff reflected that part of his role was to support families, and that this could be both challenging and rewarding, “the hardest thing to deal with is when families just aren’t coping. There’s normally a good reason they’re not coping, and (it’s about) trying to find what’s the best way of supporting.” The participants all actively sought to develop relationships with the families of children who attended their ECEC centres. They tried to find out more information and understand the children’s home setting, including by talking to parents. These findings are summarised in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2

Participation in Family Practices

Key Finding	Evidence
Different institutions (family)	Influence of family on work as ECTs:
	Sites of support and collaboration (all).
	Impact on own values and choices in personal and professional life (all).
	Positive memories and lessons learned (all).
	Influence on pedagogy (all).
	Translated into valuing of, and collaboration, with children's families (all).
	Actively sought to help children and families experiencing challenges (all).

The professional practices of the participants as teachers seems to be informed by personal experience of their own family across their lives. Collaboration is extended to families in their ECEC settings. This includes supporting families, and specifically children, by reaching out to parents and discussing problems or challenges. The family is an influential institution that contributes to the everyday practices of all participants in the study.

6.3.2 Engagement With Sport and the Arts as Institutions

Matt, Geoff and Hu highlighted sport and the arts as two additional institutions influential for their work. They represented important sources of collaboration, support and skill-building in their role as teachers. Presentation of artefacts in the interviews to reflect the value the participants place on these institutions reinforces the importance of connections between their personal and professional lives.

Experiences in sports teams were considered valuable by Matt and Hu because the lessons and skills learned from participating in sport exemplified features of ECEC. As outlined in the previous chapter, Matt was proud of his participation in sporting teams and

shared an image of himself as a premiership coach (Figure 6.2). For Matt, sport brought people together, despite their differences, “What’s really good about sport is…it’s also a really good way of looking at life…you’re all different…but you’re able to come together…meet some friends and learn some life skills.” He compared this to his work in ECEC, “I like [children] to enjoy themselves and have fun, I want them to accept each other…see what life’s about and make some really strong friendships.” Hu reflected on how useful his sporting background was for his work in ECEC, “…I just think the skills I’ve already had from sports…can be really, really beneficial to the children and it has proved to be really, really helpful.” Hu discussed a photo of his soccer team (Figure 6.3) and explained that he had also been “actively engaged in community sports as well.”

Figure 6.2

Matt: Other Institutions—Sport

Personal Artefact

Figure 6.3

Hu: Other Institutions—Sport

Personal Artefact

Participation across institutions (ECEC and sport) according to these two participants was valuable for their work as teachers.

As well as sport, arts institutions were significant as an important setting for two participants (Hu and Geoff). Similar to the two participants who were involved with sports teams, Hu and Geoff shared how experiences from involvement and interest in music, performing and visual arts helped with their work, including collaboration. Hu discussed both being employed and volunteering in the arts industry —theatres, galleries, cinema, events— and shared a photo of a team he worked with at an Indian Film Festival (Figure 6.4). He stated, "my communication skills grew, my confidence increased, and (I learnt) how to deal with different crises, how to work under pressure as well...[I learnt] just to be very calm when facing minor crises in the teaching industry." He further explained that his ECEC colleagues recognised and appreciated his composed manner, "[one] team member actually commented, 'you're always very calm, you never freak out!' (laughs)…so they've been really thankful having me as their leader." He recognised that the skills learnt from involvement in the arts industry are valuable and transferable to his work in ECEC.

Figure 6.4

Hu: Other Institutions—The Arts

Personal Artefact

For Geoff, his lifelong love of music, playing in a band (Figure 6.5), and an appreciation of art demonstrated his personal connection to arts institutions. Geoff discussed how music was a passion he shared with his parents and brothers. As outlined in the previous chapter, he explained that these interests informed the experiences he created for children to participate in and enhanced opportunities for collaboration, both inside and outside of his ECEC setting.

Figure 6.5

Geoff: Other Institutions—The Arts

Personal Artefact

Sport and the arts were important for Matt, Geoff and Hu, both as interests they pursued in their personal lives and as inspirations for their work and relationships in ECEC settings. These institutional settings were in addition to the reported significance of family to all participants. The summary findings are presented in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3

Participation Across Different Institutions

Key Finding	Evidence
Different institutions (sports teams and the arts industry)	Influence of participation in sporting activities/teams and the arts industry on work as ECTs:
	Learnt transferable skills (Geoff, Matt, Hu).
	Influence on pedagogy (Geoff, Matt, Hu).
	Sites of collaboration and teamwork (Geoff, Matt, Hu).
	Reflected and reinforced important values e.g. teamwork, cooperation, community, friendship (Geoff, Matt, Hu).

Overall, the institutions of sport and the arts enable collaboration with benefits for the participants' work in ECEC. The value of participation in varied social and cultural networks for the everyday practices and pedagogy of these MECTs is supported by findings drawn from the interviews, including discussion of artefacts. Additionally, this provides further evidence of the interwoven nature of their personal and professional lives.

6.4 Men Early Childhood Teachers and the Exercise of Agency

Through reflections on their non-traditional career choice, the way they sometimes challenge gender norms through pedagogy and use of humour, and their willingness to collaborate, all participants seem to reveal their agency within ECEC settings. This can, in turn, equip them with a capacity to engage in relational work in ways that lead to strengthening of their individual agency as MECTs. The exercise of agency can support their role as teachers, including as men teachers.

Alongside examples already shared in this and the previous chapter, the data provided further evidence indicative of the exercise of agency. One such example was given by Matt: "I like to think that I can think on my feet myself and work most things out, but I'm not someone who's ego doesn't allow me to ask anyone." Additionally, Geoff seemed to both recognise and respect agency in Hu's actions: "he's doing some really good things and is really passionate and such a local supportive and active voice for the children in his care and what he sees as important." When viewing the participants' engagements in their ECEC settings, it is suggested that their agency is driven by their intentions and commitments as individuals, which further translates into their work as MECTs. Table 6.4 summarises this finding.

Table 6.4

Exercise of Agency

Key Finding	Evidence
Agency of men teachers	Exercise of agency, including to negotiate position as MECTs:
	Non-traditional career choice (all).
	Use of humour (all).
	Challenge gender norms (all).
	Seek and provide support (all).
	Commitment to different forms of collaboration in ECEC and across institutions.

Overall, it is possible to identify ways in which Simon, Matt, Geoff and Hu exercise their agency to help them negotiate societal, institutional and personal perspectives on MECTs. The impact of agency on teaching, learning and interactions with colleagues in ECEC therefore becomes visible, and becomes a lens for further understanding how the participants manage their status as MECTs. The participants' exercise of agency is also relevant to how they collaborate and participate across institutions.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings from participant interviews suggest the importance of teamwork, collaboration and reciprocal support. The MECTs also highlight the value of mentoring and networks for professional guidance and development. Participation across different institutions such as family, sport and the arts are additional influences and sites for collaboration. Additionally, these aspects are relevant to the exercise of the participants' agency. The next chapter discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature to outline how this study makes a contribution to new knowledge.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, relevant literature related to MECTs (Chapter 2), coupled with cultural-historical theory and other key concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (Chapter 3), will be used as the framework to discuss findings related to the two research questions:

How do the personal and professional experiences of early childhood teachers identifying as men influence their everyday pedagogical practices?

How do early childhood teachers identifying as men perceive collaboration and reciprocal support across different institutional settings?

The study aims to expand existing literature related to MECTs by applying a cultural-historical lens to understand their experiences, including how they collaborate with others. The discussion is framed using Hedegaard's societal, institutional and personal perspectives (2012a). The chapter is further informed by thematic level interpretation (Chapter 4), with a focus on identification of concepts and synthesis of data (Hedegaard, 2008c). Whilst the discussion of empirical findings reinforces some aspects of the literature on MECTs, this study contributes to theoretical and empirical understandings of men teachers from a cultural-historical wholeness perspective and therefore fills a gap in the literature, since there are limited to no studies using this lens.

7.2 Societal Perspective: Influences on Everyday Practices of Men Early Childhood Teachers

The dialectic of person and society (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019) can be seen in the relationship between society, institutions and everyday practices for the research participants. The nature of this dialectical relation is explained by Hedegaard (2008b) as the interconnectedness between societal priorities, institutional practices, and individual actions

in activities. These different perspectives provide a way to understand dialectical relationships and practices in the everyday lives of MECTs, which is also important for their exercise of agency. When considering the societal perspective, for participants in this study, government frameworks for ECEC reflect societal priorities. Additionally, MECTs contend with gender stereotypes and expectations of men teachers, which can impinge on everyday practices. This is one example of the dialectical and dynamic relationships between society, different institutions and the experiences and actions of individuals, which Edwards and Fleer et al. (2019) recognise as relevant to how they make sense of their world.

Policy frameworks such as the NQF (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2020) and VEYLDF (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2016) ultimately govern the practices of MECTs, but there is also a link between practices and personal experiences. The participants' commitment to teamwork, collaboration and partnerships with families, for example, is partly influenced by participation in institutions such as the family and sport. Collaboration and partnerships are similarly promoted through the NQF and VEYLDF (Chapter 1) which both promote professional collaboration and relationships with families. Including the societal perspective of Hedegaard's wholeness approach (2009) makes connections between policy (reflective of societal values), practices in institutions (such as ECEC and sport) and individual actions (for example, supporting teamwork) visible.

A wholeness approach also highlights the effect of wider societal expectations on everyday practices of MECTs. Aligned with the literature (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Brownhill & Oates, 2016), all participants (Chapter 5) recognise the overall low value placed on the ECEC profession and the existence of gender stereotypes that influence attitudes and expectations of who can acceptably work with young children. The participants describe men being restricted from changing children's nappies (Geoff, Simon) and expectations for them

as a male role model (Simon, Hu), as also explored in the literature (Brownhill, 2014, 2015; Hedlin et al., 2019; Rohrmann, 2020; Sargent, 2013). A societal perspective encompasses the "political material conditions, cultural traditions and values" (Fleer, 2010, p. 190) that set the conditions for institutional practice. The experiences and actions of these MECTs can therefore be better understood through an explicit link between societal conditions and institutional practice.

7.3 Institutional Perspective

7.3.1 Importance of Family Practices for Pedagogy of Men Early Childhood Teachers

Hedegaard (2009) has conceptualised how learning and development of individuals is influenced by participation in everyday activities within different institutional practices of societal institutions. In doing so, she expanded on Vygotsky's recognition that individuals are both autonomous selves and products of their environment (history, society and culture) (Vygotsky, 1998; Smagorinsky, 2010). Institutional practices within institutions all have their own traditions, demands, values and activities for daily practices (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010). The institutions relevant to this study are ECEC settings, the family, sporting groups and arts and creative industries (Chapter 6). Participation in these institutions and their practices help shape the motives and development of individuals and the collective (Edwards & Hedegaard, 2019; Fleer, 2010), including MECTs.

Although some literature identifies men's own families and their experience of fatherhood as important for career choice (Jones & Aubrey, 2019; Olsen & Smeplass, 2018), a cultural-historical lens on the institution of the family from the perspectives of MECTs shifts the focus to how personal and professional family practices are interconnected and complementary. Hedegaard's work necessitates analysis of institutional practices over time to help build understanding of the motivated actions of people within everyday practices (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019). Based on the data, including their personal artefacts (Chapter

6), a recurring theme for participants is a strong emphasis on their family. All participants comment on the centrality of their family to who they are as people, including their career choice and professional persona. They share experiences related to institutional practices in their own family, for example, cooking and eating family meals, spending time together, modelling important values. These experiences can be seen to contribute to motives around direct engagement with children's families and to pedagogical choices (for example, Hu planting a vegetable garden in his ECEC centre and sending produce home for children to prepare and eat with their families). When considering children's motive development, Hedegaard (2012a) expressed this as part of a "movement initiated by the learner's emotional experience" related to participation in different activities in institutional practices (p. 21). Family practices are viewed as having special significance for children's learning and development (Hedegaard, 2008a, 2009). In the same way, the study participants' motives within ECEC draws on their own family practices. This study presents a new finding that the MECTs' own families contribute to their implementation of pedagogy, including collaboration, and hence to their development as teachers.

Viewed through the lens of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011), the participants' engagement with parents builds understanding of the family situation and leads to strategies being put in place to support children experiencing difficulties (Chapter 6). For children at risk and during times of difficult transitions, the literature examines relational work and collaboration with families (Edwards & Hedegaard, 2019; Hopwood, 2017, 2019). The interview data highlights the possibility for joint work, mediated by common knowledge of what matters to ECTs, children, parents and colleagues. This resonates with Edwards and Hedegaard's (2019) discussion of opportunities to meet and elicit what matters for each individual as potential collaborators, as a strong component of problem-solving.

The finding that participants actively engage families through collaboration further suggests the unfolding of relational agency through joint action (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021). One example is how Simon reaches out to the mother of a girl in his room who he struggled to interact with, and who often cried (Chapter 6). He shows willingness to engage in relational work on a needs basis to support the children in his care. Edwards and Fay (2019) have described how new purposeful activities can arise through gaining insights from family members, thereby enabling agentic responses to challenges professionals are experiencing. As part of a wholeness approach, connections between family practices and the commitment of MECTs to collaboration again become visible.

7.3.2 Influence of Other Institutional Practices for Pedagogy of Men Early Childhood Teachers

As well as the family, other institutions such as sport and the arts are explicitly mentioned as influential by participants in terms of everyday practices (Chapter 6). The wholeness approach necessitates analysis of these institutional practices as an entry point for understanding the motivated actions of individuals (Edwards & Fleer et al., 2019). Another research finding is that institutional practices in sport and the arts have a direct influence on pedagogy, which further demonstrates how Hedegaard's wholeness approach is valuable for developing better understanding of the motives of MECTs.

The interview data from Matt and Hu on the interplay of their personal lives and professional pedagogy related to sport, both exemplifies and extends the theories of Hedegaard and Fleer (2013), who examine how practices in one institution can cross over and influence activities in another. Whilst Hedegaard and Fleer (2013) identify typical institutions for children as being family, day care, school and higher education, Matt and Hu mention how features found in sport such as "teamwork," "developing friendships," "learning life skills" and being "outdoors" are transferred to their pedagogy. The experience of Matt and

Hu suggests it is necessary to look beyond educational institutions for insights into development, motives and learning of MECTs. For example, they emphasise promoting fun, supporting friendships amongst different children, spending time outside doing physical activities, and teamwork. At least some of their actions in ECEC are therefore linked to the institution of sport and participation in sport practices.

Further, the wholeness approach highlights the importance of societal dimensions as conditions for institutional practice (Hedegaard, 2009). Interestingly, by discussing the importance of sport to their pedagogy, Matt and Hu may be aligning with societal stereotypes around men and sport, and traditional ideas about what MECTs bring to ECEC. Institutions such as sport can be seen to reflect societal norms and values more broadly. Traditionally, playing and coaching sports are associated with being men, and for MECTs, this includes examples of more engagement in physical activities with children (Mills et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). For the MECTs in this study, participation in institutional practices in sport may be one way to mediate societal expectations about what it means to be men. As explained by Edwards and Fleer et al. (2019), institutional practices can mediate societal priorities more broadly. By contrast, the institution of the arts (music, creative pursuits) that Geoff, Hu and Simon engage in both inside and outside of ECEC is less commonly associated with men in ECEC according to Xu et al. (2022). Engagement across these institutions also influences pedagogy with the examples given of art and crafts, singing songs, and playing the guitar. These may be seen as a counterpoint to societal expectations of men, recognising that the participants also seem motivated to demonstrate ways of being men that differs from societal stereotypes.

Hedegaard's wholeness approach (2009), therefore, provides a lens for the participants' engagement in institutional practices within family, sport and the arts. Experiences and activities in a variety of institutions and specific practices have been

identified by Fleer and Hedegaard (2010) as a relation between motives and competencies of an individual. In this study, there is a link between participants' existing motives, interests and participation in different institutions in their personal lives and what they contribute to ECEC through their everyday practices.

7.4 Personal Perspective

7.4.1 Personal Perspective of Men Early Childhood Teachers Expressed as Tensions

A common situation for MECTs (Chapter 2) is to experience tensions related to how their motives are perceived by others (Cameron, 2001), how they are expected to act with children (Brownhill, 2015; Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Hedlin et al., 2019; Xu, 2020) and how they navigate their identity as men in a feminised profession (Nentwich et al., 2013; Sargent, 2013; Warin, 2006). This study identifies similar tensions expressed from the participants' personal perspective, with impact on everyday practices. While Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach has been applied to understanding conflicts and tensions for children (2008a), it can also be used to explore the tensions that MECTs experience. Furthermore, findings suggestive of the participants' personal agency in practices can be expanded by adding a relational lens.

For all participants, tensions in their professional lives may be attributable to being men teachers. In this study, there are tensions between performing gendered, stereotypical activities in their roles within ECEC (Brownhill & Oates, 2016; Cameron, 2001; Xu, 2020) and not conforming to gender norms (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Reich-Shapiro et al., 2020). Examples (Chapter 5) including being active and an "outdoor person" (Hu), dealing with children who are "throwing something or biting" (Matt) and "being a male role model" (Simon) in contrast to not "being the stereotypical tough bloke" (Geoff), "dressing up" (Simon), and being "quite domestic" (Hu). An overall need to balance their own inclinations and the expectations of parents and other colleagues to occupy the space of men teachers

arising from societal and institutional demands, is dialectically related to their personal perspective on also offering something pedagogically different. The participants seem to be carving out both a masculine identity and a caring one as MECTs, reinforcing similar findings to a study by Brody (2015). “A more complex expression of gender” (Cole et al., 2019, p. 43) through their professional role in ECEC is suggested, mediated by societal, institutional and personal perspectives, and their agentic actions within everyday practices.

A further finding relates to how men’s presence in ECEC may either challenge or reinforce gender norms. The participants in this study have many positive interactions and responses from colleagues and families in their institutional setting. A common saying is “wouldn’t it be great if we had more [men]” (Matt). The demand for “more men” is discussed in the literature (Cameron, 2001; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013; Hedlin et al., 2019; Rohrmann, 2020), yet it presents both an opportunity for advancing gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes and a risk that the presence of MECTs may actually reinforce traditional roles. The participants (Chapter 5) insist that men and women teachers are the same (same roles and responsibilities) and different (approaches to pedagogy and discipline). Sameness and equality (Nentwich et al., 2013) is promoted by the MECTs, yet gendered divisions and differences are present in the way pedagogy is expressed, as is the case in the study by Reich-Shapiro et al. (2020). Applying Hedegaard’s wholeness approach (2009) has drawn out tensions in the participants’ perceptions of their pedagogies and relationships conveyed through both difference and sameness from women teachers. Demands reflected in institutional practices and societal values for MECTs therefore further mediate the everyday practices of participants.

Finally, there is a tension between the participants’ desire to be good pedagogues and to take up a gender-neutral position as professional ECTs (Hedlin et al., 2019; Nentwich et al., 2013; Xu, 2020), juxtaposed with their expression of sometimes gendered behaviours.

The participants' personal perspectives on being a good teacher suggests use of skills that can be considered as non-gender specific, for example, creativity (Simon, Hu, Geoff) and communication skills (Hu). Additionally, Geoff explicitly states that for most families, if their children are happy, cared for and learning "what your gender is [as a teacher] doesn't come into that" (Chapter 5). The participants express the importance of quality of teaching and learning, as also described by Besnard and Letarte (2017). However, as previously stated, all participants have a propensity to sometimes perpetuate stereotypical gender norms through their pedagogy – similar to "the fun guy" who plays, jokes and supports physical activity (Hedlin et al., 2019, p. 102). However, not all men in that study took up the position of "fun guy." Notably, as they became more experienced, they focused on their role as professional ECTs in a way that was not related to gender. Similarly, in this study, the participants express a personal perspective that aligns with being a gender-neutral good pedagogue. Nonetheless, expressions and expectations of gendered behaviours persist for the participants, such as being a male role model. The MECTs everyday practices therefore reflect the dynamic relationships between person, institutional practice and societal conditions in a way that reinforces the complexity of gender in the ECEC setting. However, they seem able to accept tensions and overcome challenges through exercise of their agency, including through collaboration with others.

7.4.2 Use of Humour to Explore Tensions, as a Form of Relational Work

When considering the implication of these tensions for everyday practices, including in terms of how MECTs work with women colleagues, all participants in this study demonstrate their humour when discussing gender in the ECEC setting. A study that examined parent's comments on Twitter in relation to "home schooling" found that a humorous approach to the challenges presented during COVID-19 was common (Ewing & Vu, 2021 p. 77). More broadly, humour has been identified as a key form of human

interaction that is primarily a universal phenomenon, but with some cultural differences (Martin & Sullivan, 2013). Australians were found to not be as negative about humour as their British counterparts in the study by Martin and Sullivan (2013). For the MECTs in this study, humour seems to be one way they seek to address and subvert societal stereotypes that elevate differences between men and women teachers, recognising these may be a barrier to effective collaboration and joint work. Humour may therefore be characterised as a mechanism for participants and their colleagues to build relational agency.

Through adding a relational lens, the use of humour to address gender could indicate relational expertise, the building of common knowledge and the unfolding of relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011). This is firstly because addressing "complex problems" requires relational expertise (Edwards, 2017a, p. 8). The existence of gender stereotypes in ECEC could be characterised as a "complex problem" for MECTs. The literature on MECTs illustrates the gendered and feminised nature of ECEC work with women considered to be more naturally capable of addressing children's needs contrasted with doubts about men's motives and capabilities (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Brody, 2015; Hedlin & Aberg, 2013). It is possible that expanding interpretations and responses to this problem of gender stereotypes through using humour enables MECTs and their women colleagues to collaborate more effectively in mixed-gender workforces.

Data from the participants indicates that "gender sort of joke[s]" (Hu) underline differences, as well as builds understanding, rapport and acceptance. Recognising the values and motives of others in practices and being able to align and engage with these over time are features of relational expertise and build common knowledge (Edwards et al., 2017). An ability to negotiate differences across practices to reveal, explore and transform knowledge is another feature of common knowledge (Duhn et al., 2016; Hopwood, 2017, 2022). Humour seems to be an everyday practice for participants in relation to gender and may therefore help

to promote joint agentic actions for working together as colleagues in ECEC. Humour can be viewed as a resource that represents common knowledge for these MECTs, recognising their motive orientations are directed at collaboration. As described by Edwards and Fay (2019), being able to work agentically with others to both interpret and respond to problems demonstrates a capacity for relational agency mediated by common knowledge. The relational agency may exist in recognition of different expectations in ECEC and a desire to negotiate these for the benefit of collaboration. An unexpected new finding from this study is that differences between genders expressed and experienced by the MECTs may be partially addressed through humour as a way to acknowledge societal expectations of men in the ECEC sector and as a form of relational agency.

7.4.3 Personal Perspective of Men Early Childhood Teachers on Collaboration

As well as suggesting a commitment to cross-gender work, the data indicates benefits from engagement with other men in ECEC, based on an expectation of shared or common understandings and experiences (Chapter 6). All participants perceive value in working with other MECTs: for example, talking to men can "be more comfortable" (Simon) and "no-one's going to misread anything" (Geoff). Similar sentiments have been expressed by men working as teachers in the early years and primary pre-service teachers who participated in men-only support groups (Warwick et al., 2012). The participants in this study (Chapter 5) further suggest that expertise they have developed working as MECTs is useful to share with other men new to ECEC (for example, specific advice on working with babies, reaching out for support from others). Warwick et al. (2012) also found that advice and support from practising men teachers was appreciated by men who were about to enter the profession. Support groups of men teachers have been identified as advantageous overall (Cole et al., 2019; Warwick et al., 2012). When adding a relational lens, this study does not use a traditional definition of building common knowledge across different practices or professions

(Edwards et al., 2017), but suggests that for these MECTs, common knowledge of being men teachers encompasses a holistic view of personal and professional experiences as a resource to enable collaborations.

Finally, an additional way that Matt, Geoff and Hu seek to respond to challenges and demands in institutional practices, including with respect to being men teachers, is through mentoring (Chapter 6). Mentoring is recognised as helpful for teachers overall and generally occurs during, for example, pre-service teacher education, student teacher practicums or to support new practising teachers (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Nolan, 2017; Nolan & Molla, 2018). Edwards (2017b) recognised the value of mentoring for the development of mentees as agentic learners and teachers. As outlined in Chapter 3, Ben-Harush and Orland-Barak (2019) have also identified an opportunity to explore mentoring using the lens of relational agency. Mentoring for the MECTs in this study is regularly used to help address problems of practice and seems to be one way they demonstrate their agency in response to demands they face. Furthermore, a propensity for collaboration indicative of relational agency (Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2019) is suggested, given the participants descriptions of the mentor/mentee relationship as an opportunity to jointly discuss challenges and find solutions in ways that contribute to their development and learning as MECTs.

Interestingly, in this study, for some participants, mentoring and supportive relationships exist not only in teaching and learning settings for ECEC, but in other institutions. For example, Geoff's "workshop talks" with his mother (Chapter 6) involve informal mentoring and collaboration across ECEC and the family. Engagement across institutions for mentoring, learning and support may therefore be important as a new finding, particularly considering how influential practices in other institutions are for the pedagogy and everyday practices of participants.

7.5 Conclusion

The study demonstrates how a cultural-historical wholeness approach (Hedegaard, 2009) can expand understanding of personal and professional experiences of MECTs and how these are interconnected. It examines the influence of societal expectations and traditions on institutional practices and demands, and by extension, the professional pedagogy and motives of MECTs. Furthermore, when considering how participants perceive collaboration as an essential skill for their work in ECEC, the concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011) offer an opportunity to enhance understanding of how MECTs exercise their agency in collaboration with others, including across institutions. This is particularly important given the existence of stereotypical gender norms in society concerning the roles of men (and women) about the care and education of young children, and the need to navigate or negotiate being men teachers in ECEC. A cultural-historical wholeness approach has framed the research questions and led to some discoveries that support a holistic view of men teachers. The next chapter explains why these findings matter and how they could be extended through further research.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

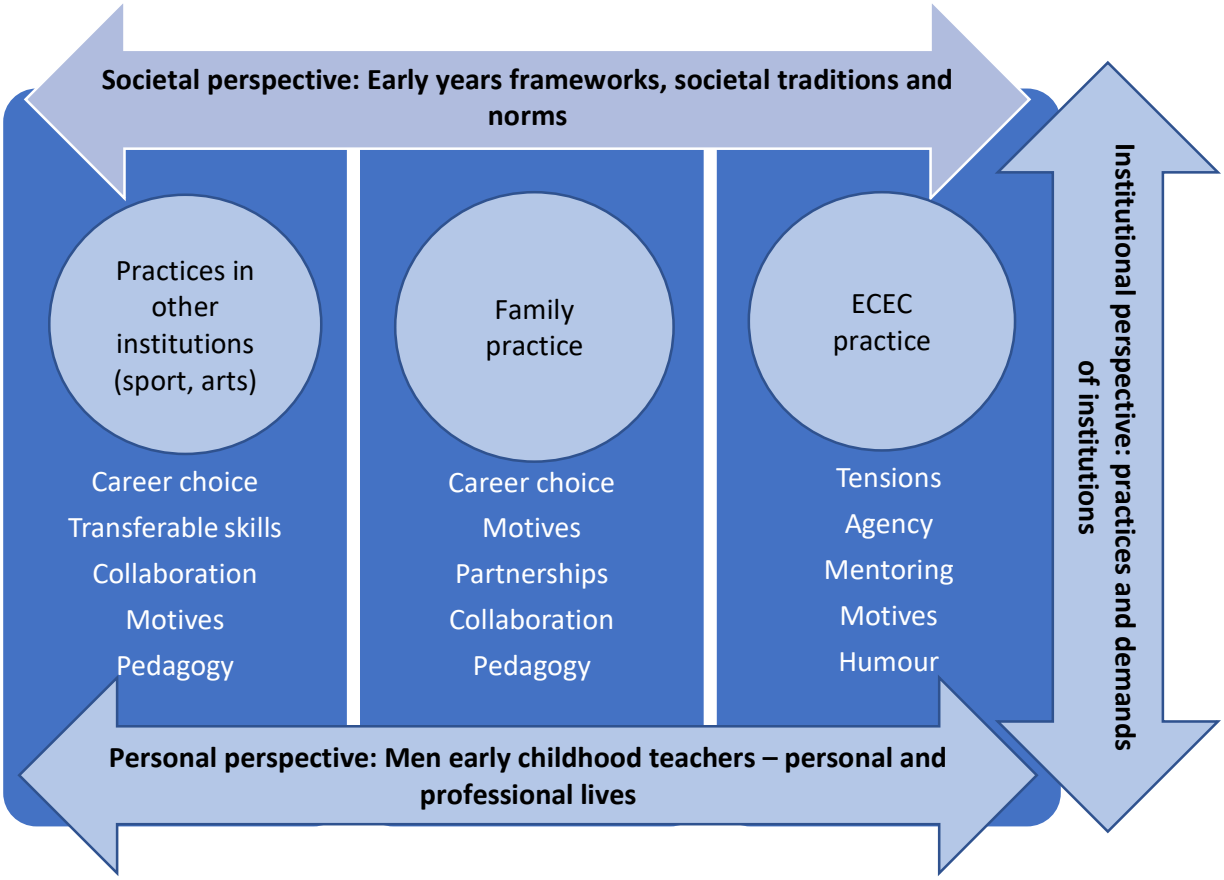
The final chapter concludes the study by drawing together key findings pertaining to personal and professional experiences and ways of working of MECTs, and relating them to the theoretical framework. Then I discuss the broader implications of the findings, and present recommendations for future research based on identifying limitations of the study. This is followed by concluding remarks.

8.2 Summary of the Findings

This study began with the objective to better understand personal and professional experiences of four early childhood teachers identifying as men. The findings indicate that, for the participants, a relationship exists between their personal and professional lives that informs career choice and pedagogy. Being men teachers further shapes how pedagogy is expressed. Additionally, participation in, and collaboration across, different institutions has benefits for everyday practices. The relational aspects of ECEC work are highlighted by how participants perceive engagement in networks and mentoring and their cooperation and collaboration with colleagues and parents, including for problem-solving and addressing challenges. The MECTs seem able to exercise their agency as a means to manage tensions and negotiate their status as MECTs. Figure 8.1 shows how the theoretical concepts and findings can be brought together under the framework of a wholeness approach.

Figure 8.1

Wholeness Approach for Understanding Men Early Childhood Teachers



The two research questions contribute to existing literature on MECTs through applying a cultural-historical lens. As indicated in Figure 8.1, the theoretical contribution of the study is to show how Hedegaard's wholeness approach (2009) can be usefully applied and extended to increase understanding of MECTs. The societal, institutional and personal perspectives contribute to a more holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. Participation in institutional practices can influence motives and pedagogy, including collaboration. The participants' own family practice is especially important, alongside practices in other institutions such as sport and the arts. A dialectical relation between the participants and practices across time and institutions can therefore be seen. This study also

applies the concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (Edwards 2005, 2011) specifically to how collaboration is perceived by MECTs. It is suggested that humour use aids collaboration in the ECEC setting. Additionally, common knowledge as MECTs can be a resource for other men entering the profession, with benefits for practice. The main contributions of the study are outlined in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1

Contributions of the Study

Type of contribution	Nature of contribution
Theoretical	A cultural-historical wholeness approach can enable a holistic view of personal and professional experiences of MECTs, including the dialectical relation between societal values/priorities, institutional practices and individual actions, including agency, of MECTs.
Empirical	Personal experiences of MECTs and their participation in different institutions (sport, the arts) can influence their pedagogy and everyday practices, including collaboration.
Empirical	Family practice seems to be particularly important for MECTs, with influence on development of motives, everyday practices and pedagogy.
Empirical	Teamwork and mentoring are important in ECEC and may happen across institutions in which MECTs participate, with benefits for everyday practices, agency and pedagogy.
Empirical	Humour use may be a vehicle for developing relational expertise, building common knowledge and relational agency.
Empirical	Common knowledge of being men teachers encompasses a holistic view of personal and professional experiences as a resource to enable collaborations.

Overall, the study brings into focus the interwoven nature of the personal and professional lives of participants, and their engagement with, and responses to, the values, traditions and demands of the society and institutions in which they live, learn and work.

8.3 Implications of the Findings

Although gender does not seem to be a significant consideration for the participants' career choice, it is relevant to pedagogy, everyday practices and relationships with women colleagues and parents. The association between societal and institutional stereotypes of men in ECEC and personal experiences of MECTs as they pertain to gender roles and norms (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Bhana & Moosa, 2015; Brody, 2015; Xu, 2020) is confirmed by the study findings. Therefore, this supports approaches that pay attention to gender in recruitment, training, ongoing support and professional development for men. Warin et al. (2020) have highlighted the importance of the ECEC workforce becoming more gender diverse and gender sensitive in a British context, with specific strategies for recruiting and supporting men, including exploration of gender awareness/sensitivity during both formal and informal training. This study suggests that the same approach is warranted for the Australian ECEC sector.

According to participants' descriptions, humour seems to be used as a way to approach gender norms and roles in ECEC. More broadly, some research on humour in Australia suggests its use to address challenging, unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations (Ewing & Vu, 2021; Martin et al., 2013). In finding a common use of humour by MECTs in this study, it is suggested that humour could be leveraged to enhance collaboration in ECEC settings, particularly relating to gender issues. This could also be extended to training. If introduced in this way, there needs to be sensitivity and recognition that ECTs are from diverse cultures with different understandings around humour.

Findings indicate that mentoring is a valuable resource for MECTs that can promote their agency, including related to their position as men teachers. Although not specifically related to MECTs, the literature reinforces how mentoring can be mutually beneficial, dynamic, multi-faceted and reciprocal (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Nolan, 2017). According to the research participants, there is a benefit for men entering the sector to be able to access advice from other MECTs. The idea of support groups for men is supported by some of the research literature on men teachers (Cole et al., 2019). This indicates the value of relatability, successful role models, and opportunities to guide and assist others in formal as well as informal ways that are less structured than mentoring. Additionally, opportunities for mentoring may exist outside of immediate classroom settings or formal ECEC networks. Another consideration, therefore, is how participation in other institutions might play a role in providing support for learning, development and agency of MECTs.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to expand the concepts of relational expertise, common knowledge and relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011). They can be applied to the interwoven personal and professional experiences of men teachers to further understanding of the ways collaboration and problem-solving are valued by MECTs. Tensions MECTs face due to societal and institutional perspectives (specifically gender roles and norms) may be able to be managed through, for example, common knowledge as MECTS and building relational agency through humour use. The transformative potential of relational agency is posited by Hopwood (2022): “the effective collaborations that relational agency makes possible may often challenge the status quo and herald changes…” (p. 117). Perhaps in the case of MECTs, this is possible, given the way that relational work helps to promote listening, align motives and sharpen the focus on what matters in ECEC, ultimately the health, wellbeing and learning of young children. Challenging the status quo when it comes to MECTs is important from societal, institutional and personal perspectives.

Overall, it is acknowledged that the small sample size and qualitative nature of this research means that generalisable recommendations cannot be made. Additionally, I acknowledge my subjectivity as a researcher (she/her) and the way this informed the research and framed data collection and analysis. Despite these limitations, the intention of this study is to provide insights that may help to inform strategies and practices to support MECTs, based on the perspectives and lived experiences of the research participants. Much has already been written in the literature about men who work in ECEC, drawing on different theories, perspectives and methodologies. Through applying a cultural-historical theoretical approach and method, the aim of this research is to contribute a different lens to that scholarship.

8.4 Recommendations for Further Research

There are potential areas of further research that have become evident from the findings in this study. Firstly, this study focused on participants who identified as men to the exclusion of other potential intersecting identities. Due to limited time, resources, a desire to contain the breadth of the study and my subjective interest in the participants' identity as men, I chose a narrower focus. Yet two participants describe their Asian heritage and cultural background as pertinent to personal and professional choices and experiences as ECTs. There is potential for future research to explore how a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background mediates the personal and professional experiences of MECTs, and consider the implications for career choice, pedagogy and everyday practices.

Secondly, other intersecting identities of MECTs are relevant to personal and professional experiences. Promotion of workforce diversity in ECEC is needed to address labour shortages and to ensure that young children are exposed to a diverse range of genders. LGBTQIA+ community members who work in ECEC could be invited for joint research endeavours. Future research could use a cultural-historical wholeness approach to understand

their experiences and how they navigate or negotiate their work in ECEC, recognising there is limited existing literature (Chapter 2).

Thirdly, based on my small sample, in which three out of four MECTs joined the ECEC profession later in life and not straight out of school, it is worth exploring in more depth how, when and why men chose careers and what that means for recruitment strategies aimed specifically at attracting more men to join the sector. Lack of early careers guidance and opportunities for boys and men to have work experience in ECEC are some of the issues constraining recruitment of men in the field according to some researchers (Warin et al., 2020). Another area of potential research is whether it would be beneficial to explicitly target a diverse range of men who have transferable skills from other careers, and also men from CALD backgrounds, in order to address overall labour shortages and the small percentage of men in the sector. This study further highlights a potential avenue for more in-depth research to recruit and attract MECTs by linking practices in different institutions with skills and experiences that can lead to successful careers in ECEC.

Finally, the study identifies family as a particularly important institution for participants in terms of career choice and influences on their pedagogy, including collaboration. This suggests the need for further study with more focus on the intersection of, and opportunities for, personal and professional family practices in the case of MECTs. Additionally, the arts and sport are other institutions highlighted by the MECTs with an influence on personal and professional experiences, and on everyday practices, including teamwork. This opens up areas of future research on how different institutions in which men participate supports their role as MECTs. Hedegaard's (2009) recognition of the significance of participation across different institutional contexts can therefore be further extended to increase understanding of the experiences of MECTs.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

The broader societal and institutional issues that have long been a barrier for many men to enter and remain in the ECEC sector continue to be difficult to address. However, despite challenges and tensions they experience, the MECTs in this study convey a strong commitment to ECEC overall. The study demonstrates ways MECTs successfully negotiate their status in ECEC settings. A more holistic understanding of personal and professional experience of MECTs, and how these are interconnected, presents an important opportunity to further target and tailor training and support for MECTs to the specific needs, strengths and challenges of men, in all their diversity. I hope this cultural-historical study offers some understanding and insights which will help make it possible for more men to have rewarding and sustained careers in ECEC.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee Approval

MONASH University

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Approval Certificate

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and has granted approval.

Project ID: 28538
Project Title: Exploring the experiences of male early childhood teachers in Victoria, Australia
Chief Investigator: Dr Gloria Quinones Goytortua
Approval Date: 02/08/2021
Expiry Date: 02/08/2026

Terms of approval - failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

1. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. Amendments to approved projects including changes to personnel must not commence without written approval from MUHREC.
7. Annual Report - continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report.
8. Final Report - should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected completion date.
9. Monitoring - project may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
10. Retention and storage of data - The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

Kind Regards,

Professor Nip Thomson

Chair, MUHREC

CC: Ms Nicole Rodger, Dr Megan Adams

List of approved documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Consent Form	Consent Form Male Early Childhood Teachers Nicole Rodger FINAL	26/07/2021	1
Explanatory Statement	Explanatory Statement Male Early Childhood Teachers Nicole Rodger FINAL	26/07/2021	1
Supporting Documentation	Recruitment email and Posts Male Early Childhood Teachers Nicole Rodger FINAL	26/07/2021	1

Appendix B:

Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Men Early Childhood Teachers

Project ID: 28538
Project title: Exploring the personal and professional experiences of men early childhood teachers in Victoria, Australia

Chief Investigator Name: Dr Gloria Quinones Goytortua
Faculty of Education
Phone:
Email:

Student Name: Nicole Rodger
Phone:
Email:

Co-Investigator Name: Dr Megan Adams
Faculty of Education
Phone:
Email:

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	**Yes**	**No**
I agree to be interviewed by the researcher one-on-one	☐	☐
I agree to allow interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim	☐	☐
I agree to share samples of planning schedules and photos from my Early Childhood Education and Care setting for discussion	☐	☐
I agree to share personal artefacts or photos from my life for discussion	☐	☐
The de-identified data that I provide during this research may be used by the above-mentioned researchers in future related research projects	☐	☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from further participation at any stage. However, I will not be able to withdraw my data after it has been collected, as any/all data I provide will be included in the research project.
I understand that any data that the researcher extracts from the interview for use in reports or published findings will not, under any circumstances, contain identifying names or characteristics. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any report on the project, or to any other party. I understand that data from the interview will be kept in secured storage and will be accessible only to the research team. I also understand that the data will be destroyed after a 5-year period unless I consent to it being used in future related research projects.

Name of Participant _____
Participant's Signature _____ Date

Appendix C:

Explanatory Statement

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT
Men Early Childhood Teachers

Project ID: 28538
Project title: Exploring the personal and professional experiences of men early childhood teachers in Victoria, Australia

Chief Investigator Name: Dr Gloria Quinones Goytortua
Faculty of Education
Phone:
Email:

Student Name: Nicole Rodger
Phone:
Email:

Co-Investigator Name: Dr Megan Adams
Faculty of Education
Phone:
Email:

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

Nicole Rodger is conducting this research project with Dr Gloria Quinones and Dr Megan Adams in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, towards a Master in Education by Research. This research project will explore the life of male early childhood educators and their experiences related to work in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings with preschool-aged children in Victoria, Australia. The aim of the research is to understand how life history influences experiences and practices of male early childhood teachers in an ECEC setting, how expectations and demands related to culture, traditions and values of society and institutions are managed, and what tools male teachers use to navigate their role in ECEC.

What does the research involve?
The research involves participating in interviews. You will be involved in 1 one-on-one interview of approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview will be conducted at a time and place suitable for you. There will be no direct observations of your work in your early childhood setting. However, you will be asked to bring samples of your planning schedules and photos from your setting. You will also be asked to bring photos and/or artefacts that have meaning to you in your life. All samples, artefacts and photos will be for sharing and discussion during the interview. Photos of these items will be taken as part of data collection. Any identifying information will be removed from raw data and from the thesis, to protect your confidentiality.

Why were you chosen for this research?
You have been identified through personal contacts and informal networks of men working as early childhood teachers.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research
By signing and returning the consent form you are agreeing to participate in the study, as outlined in this Explanatory Statement.

Due to the voluntary nature of this study, you are under no obligation to consent to participate. There is no payment or reward offered, financial or otherwise, for participating in this research. You can choose not to answer particular questions during the interviews. However, you will not be able to withdraw your data after it has been collected as any/all data you provide will be included in the research project (as outlined in the consent form).

Possible benefits and risks to participants
We anticipate that there will be no inconvenience for you outside of what you might normally expect in everyday life. However, there will be discussion and reflection about your life and work experiences and personal history that might cause some discomfort. If you are concerned or worried about anything to do with the research, counselling services can be recommended for you.

Confidentiality
To protect your confidentiality and anonymity, the information gathered during the interviews will be stored securely and only the researchers will have access to it.

No publication will use your name or other details that could be used to identify you. A pseudonym will be used in all publications, including in the research report. The student researcher will be responsible for transcribing the interviews and will not be using transcription or third-party services to assist with data preparation or analysis. Your consent form will be kept in a separate location to your data. Identifiable data from the consent form will never be published.

Storage of data
If you grant permission, the data collected for this study will be kept for future research. Only aggregated de-identified data will be used for other projects. If permission is not granted, the data will be kept for up to five years in a secure location, before being destroyed (placed in secure document bins for hard copies, and wiped from hard drives and cloud storage for electronic data).

Results
The results of this research will be made available on completion of the research project. To be informed of the research findings, please contact Nicole Rodger.

Complaints
Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC):

Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Room 111, Chancellery Building D, 26 Sports Walk
Clayton Campus, Research Office
Monash University VIC 3800

Thank you,

Dr Gloria Quinones

Appendix D:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Men Early Childhood Teachers

Perspective	Indicative questions
Demographic information	Tell me about yourself (age, education, ethnicity, languages spoken, qualifications, years of teaching experience, age range of children working with etc.). Can you provide some background information about your current position/work circumstances/work setting. What was your route or pathway into the early childhood sector?
Personal	Tell me about your life's journey, particularly as it relates to your decision to become an early childhood teacher. What were your main motivations for beginning a career in ECEC? Are your motivations still the same now, or have they changed? What do you think are some of your important qualities/skills/strengths in terms of your role as an early childhood teacher? What part of your work in ECEC do you enjoy most? What are your most preferred activities in your work? Can you give me an example? What are your least preferred activities in your work? Can you give me an example? What kind of challenges do you face working as an ECEC teacher? What are your future aspirations for your professional life? I asked you to bring some personal photos/artefacts from your life that are important and meaningful to you. Can you please tell me about these? What do you value most about these?/What do they mean to you?
Institutional	How would you describe the culture and philosophy of your ECEC setting? When thinking about your ECEC setting, what is expected from you in this setting i.e. your responsibilities, accountabilities, expectations, roles? How do you manage them? Are these different or the same to the expectations and roles of other educators in your setting? Why might this be the case do you think? What matters to you in your everyday practices in your ECEC setting? When participating in everyday practices, are there differences associated with you being a male teacher? Can you share an example/s of an issue or challenge you faced at work, and how you dealt with it? Who did you turn to for support? Has anyone ever come to you for support in your ECEC setting, with an issue or challenge etc. and if so, how did you respond? Can you share how you collaborate with others in your ECEC setting? Can you talk about any mentoring relationships/being mentored and/or providing mentoring? How important was mentoring to you? Have you ever participated in a professional network or community of practice? If so, what benefit did it have? Do you have any specific 'tools in your toolbox,' that help you navigate your status as a male educator in your setting? How would you describe your pedagogical goals and practices overall? I asked you to bring some examples of classroom planning schedule and photos from your ECEC setting. Can you tell me about these? Can you describe in more detail one particular activity in your plan/as shown in a photo and what it represents to you?

Perspective	Indicative questions
Societal	In what ways, if any, do you think men working in early childhood care and education might be perceived or treated differently by society? What expectations or perceptions do people have of you as a male working in early childhood (could be of parents, colleagues/managers etc.)? Where do you think these expectations or perceptions stem from? Have you noticed any change in these over time?
Conclusion	What would your advice be to anyone who wants to work as an early childhood educator? Would that advice be any different if the person was male? Do you have anything you want to add that we have not talked about? If so, what?

Appendix E:

Thematic Interpretation Table

Headings from findings chapter	Societal perspective (societal conditions and demands)	Institutional perspective (practices)	Personal perspective (learning and development, motives)	Discussion – thematic interpretation (wholeness approach)	Literature
5.2 Relationship between personal life, career choice and professional pedagogy 5.2.1 Personal experiences and career choice 5.2.2 Personal experiences and individual pedagogy	ECEC as low status, existence of stereotypes about who can/should work in ECEC (all). Some distrust of MECTs (Simon, Geoff). Male role models (Simon, Hu).	Participation in different institutions influences career choice and pedagogy (all). Emphasis on teamwork and collaboration across institutions (home/family, sport, ECEC, creative pursuits) (all).	Teaching as a career: family history (Geoff, Hu); respect for profession (Geoff, Simon, Hu); support from family (all). Transferable skills/previous careers (Simon, Matt, Hu). Prior experience with children (Simon, Matt). Sport, outdoors, active – from personal life to professional pedagogy (Matt, Hu, Geoff). Creativity, arts, cooking, music – from personal life to professional	Societal policies, expectations and values inform /influence MECT practice in ECEC. Personal and professional experiences combined to inform practices and pedagogy as MECTs (all).	Distrust of men's motives/low status/women's work; male role model (societal/institutional). Life experience as relevant to career choice, including formative experiences, own family and family history of teachers (personal). Via pedagogy, men can reinforce roles, stereotypes and norms or challenge them/show different ways of being men (personal/ institutional). <u>Contribution:</u> personal experiences (e.g. previous careers;

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			pedagogy (Simon, Geoff, Hu).		transferable skills) and participation in different institutions; – influence on pedagogy (personal/ institutional).
5.3 Experiencing being men teachers 5.3.1 The intersection of societal assumptions and experiences in ECEC 5.3.2 Personal perspectives on men and women early childhood teachers	As above.	Appreciation of parents/colleagues of MECTs as adding something different/ overall favourable response (all). Use of humour to acknowledge stereotypes about men and women ECTs (all).	Men and women teachers are the same (tasks/responsibilities /professionals) (all). Men and women teachers are different (pedagogy, discipline, male role model) (all). Pedagogical preferences – some associated with stereotypical ways of being men, some break stereotypes (all). Advice to/support from/working with other men valuable when opportunities exist (all).	Tensions related to being MECTs. Common knowledge as MECTs enables collaboration in a context where work in ECEC is widely considered to be the domain of women. Humour use as helping to facilitate relational work between men and women in ECEC, shows awareness of the 'problem' of men in ECEC based on societal stereotypes – can work as MECTs, and in mixed gender workforces, mediated	Sameness/difference between men and women expressed. As men both challenge and reinforce gender norms. Contribution: humour use by MECTs as a vehicle for developing relational expertise and building common knowledge.

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				by humour as common knowledge.	
6.2 Importance of professional relationships for collaboration 6.2.1 Teamwork 6.2.2 Professional networks 6.2.3 Mentoring	As above.	Advice to/support from other men in ECEC or about to enter ECEC as useful (all).	Teamwork important, including for problem solving, addressing challenges (all). Formal mentors and networks important (Geoff, Hu) + informal mentors (Geoff, Hu, Matt). Teamwork, professional networks, mentoring as foundations for collaboration.	Mentoring relationships in ECEC as a way to respond to demands and challenges. Mentoring happens inside ECEC, but supportive relationships, informal mentoring may happen in other institutions. Common knowledge as men teachers – reciprocal support.	Teamwork, mentoring, networks generally important for teachers; support networks for men teachers, particularly at times of vulnerability, useful. <u>Contribution:</u> teamwork and mentoring may happen across institutions MECTs participate in with benefits for practice.
6.3 Participation and collaboration across different institutions 6.3.1 Influence of families on participants' practice 6.3.2 Engagement with sport and the arts as institutions	As above.	Values/practice traditions promoted in and across different institutions influence pedagogy and practices in ECEC (family, sport, the arts) e.g. teamwork,	Influence on pedagogy (all). Sites of collaboration and teamwork that crosses over institutions (all). Family practice as particularly	Family practice as key: connection to family and motive development around engagement with children's families. Working with families to support children suggests	<u>Contribution:</u> understanding of how participation across institutions influences pedagogy and everyday practices.

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6.4 MECTs and the exercise of agency		cooperation, community, friendship (Matt, Geoff, Hu).	important across institutions (all). Skills and experience from different institutions also influence ECEC e.g. communication, working under pressure, teamwork (all). Indicative of agency.	relational work: being aware of what matters for parents and clear on own motives to support the child + common knowledge to identify way forward + relational agency as joint action. Participation in institutions contributes to professional motives/ and commitments to collaboration, reciprocal support.	