Utilising Situational Analysis to Understand Educator-Family Collaborative Partnerships in a Poststructural Case Study

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Abstract

This paper evidences the process of employing Situational Analysis in a poststructural case study that investigated educator-family collaborative partnerships. The author addresses research design decisions that both supported and enhanced the methodology towards the construction of new knowledge. Embedded in the case study across three case sites, three educators and three families participated in a series of observations, interviews, and collaborative mapping to reveal the findings of this project. In filling gaps identified in literature, the study aimed to elucidate the multiple perspectives of stakeholders through observation and interviews, whilst promoting the voice of both families and educators through participatory situational analysis mapping with the researcher. Findings of this study offer opportunities for all stakeholders to deepen their understanding of what enables effective collaborative partnerships in practice. Furthermore, the unique methodological approach to this study adds to the breadth of knowledge in poststructural research possibilities.

1. Introduction

International policies on education reform have nominated family engagement in educational frameworks and curriculums as a priority. Primarily this includes the recognition of families as children's first educators, holders of expert knowledge of the child, and as the child's advocate [1]. A significant body of literature champions the value and importance of collaborative partnership [2] with the *quality* of interactions between families and educators surfaced as being more impactful than the *quantity* alone [3]. The success of educator-family engagements have implications on service provision quality [4] and positive outcomes for the child. Existing research evidences tensions for both educators and families around a lack of conceptual clarity, resulting in poor understandings and practices of collaborative partnership [5].

Research findings on collaborative partnerships globally call for more specific considerations of the mechanisms used to create and maintain successful collaborative partnerships [4]. A number of authors including Vuorinen [2] called for observational studies to consider partnership practices in action, with particular emphasis on the limited moments of time for educators and families to collaborate at drop off and pick up times [6]. Elevating the voice of each stakeholder's lived experience for themselves was also an important call out by the research field [2, 7, 8].

In the Australian setting, scholars [9, 10] contend that inexact interpretation of ambiguous language in the National Quality Framework (NQF) has the potential to engender inadequate engagement practices between educators and families. Challenging these findings, data from the Australian Childrens Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) assessment results found in Quarter 1 (January to March 2021) that 29% of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services rated *Exceeding* the NQS in Quality Area 6 (QA6) Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities [11].

The identified gaps in existing research, together with the ACECQA data, offered an opportunity to consider more deeply the nature of Australia's ECEC collaborative partnerships through a research project. Ethics approval was provided by University of Southern Queensland (H21REA115) as this study sought to investigate the following three research questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. The research questions and associated data collection method

Study Question	Data collection Method
How do educators and families describe their experiences of collaborative partnerships?	Semi Structured interviews
How do educators and families interact in ways that evidence collaborative partnerships?	Observation
What are the key components and inclusions that reflect exceeding collaborative partnerships?	Observation Semi Structured interviews Participant & researcher

	collaborative relational mapping

2. Research Design

Permeating each element of this study's research design [12] were the poststructural tenants that celebrated multiple truths from a diversity of perspectives, providing for no one viewpoint to be privileged over another [13, 14]. The complexities of the interrelationship between people and their environment were illuminated through qualitative investigations where the phenomenon was interpreted by the meanings people brought to them [15]. Rosenberg and Yates [16] offer case study as an opportunity that is "not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position" (p447), that provides agnostic and practical versatility. Case study offers a pragmatic view of knowledge that elevates the complexities of life [17]. The reflexive nature of this study's qualitative design allowed for the simultaneous interaction of the research components to be concurrent rather than sequential, [12] further supported by the use of Situational Analysis (SA) [18] methods. This allowed for a critically multilayered consideration of the research situation, participants, environment, and the co-construction of knowledge itself.

2.1. Situational Analysis (SA)

The critical gaze provided for through SA considers how phenomenon are taken up, resisted, or modified by gaining insight from the conditions, structures, processes, mechanisms and relationships (and the links between these) in an iterative cartographic approach [19]. In this study, the cartographic mapping of qualitative data that was co-constructed through interaction [20, 21], enabled the researcher to tease out a comprehensive framework that exposed connections and relationships across the research situation. The positioning of the researcher within the context as an active participant and research instrument was supported by the poststructural framework and embraced by SA [13, 22]. Three types of maps were produced. These are: 1) Situational and relational maps, 2) Social world/arena maps, and 3) Positional maps. These maps, and the findings they elucidate will be extrapolated further shortly.

2.2. Data Collection

This research sought to take a strengths-based approach to answering the research questions. All licensed ECEC services in Queensland, Australia that were rated 'Exceeding' in Quality Area 1: Program and Practice, and Quality Area 6: Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities (308 in total) were emailed in August 2022 and offered an opportunity to participate in the study. Of these 308 services, a non-probability sample of three ECEC services were engaged for the study.

Table 2. Case site details

Service Name	Places
Gumnut Childcare*	50
Indigo House*	175
Mountain Kids*	99

Purposive intensity sampling was utilised to select educators (*N=3*) followed by convenience sampling for families (*N=3*) in the space. As this study's intent was to deeply understand a small number of participants, there was no prevailing rule regarding sample size [23].

Data collection was carried out from September to December 2022 and included participant observation followed by semi structured interviews with the educators (*n=3*) and families (*n=3*). Within a poststructural case study the variety of data collection methods creates multiple dynamic viewpoints from which to consider numerous relationships and positions within the data.

2.3. Data Analysis

Observation and interviews were uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 Plus. Transcripts were open coded line by line. This was followed by a process of axial coding. Simultaneously to this, the three types of situational analysis cartographic maps began to develop. SA is celebrated for its ability to embrace the messy complexities of research situations, particularly harnessing with transparency the role and positioning of the researcher [24, 25].

2.3.1. Messy (Abstract) Map. Messy Maps were the first to be created in this study. These evolved from situational data of the research situation as defined by Clarke [18] as encompassing all that is in and around the research phenomenon, as well as being informed by initial data collection observations and interviews with participants. As an iterative process, SA mapping provides for multiple versions of maps to be worked and reworked. This messy map in Figure 1 is the saturated result of these productions. The culmination of researching literature, experiencing the field, deconstructing statistics, and deep consideration of all factors, human, nonhuman, discourses, structures, actors, and elements that influence the research situation. The underpinning theoretical framework of the study's design embraces the researcher's

ontological perspective as being articulated in these messy maps [24].

Figure 1. Messy situational map

In organising these random scatterings into an ordered method, the Situational Ordered Maps evolved (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Tabulated ordered situational map

2.3.2. Ordered Map. Typically, in sharing research findings using SA, publications do not include the workings of researcher's messy mapping. Each of the identified influences on the research situation that were considered necessary inclusions in the finalised messy map, were then arranged in the ordered map. Once the ordered map was tabulated in Figure 2, relational mapping would occur between elements. The maps produced in SA do not elucidate findings themselves, as the method aims to avoid constrictive results being drawn. Rather the maps, such as these ordered maps in Figure 2, examine discourse related to the research situation, illuminating multiple truths [26] that support the construction of new knowledge.

2.3.3. Relational Map. Relational mapping was undertaken twice during this study. Once in a non-typical format during the second of two interviews with participants, and later as part of the usual SA cartographic method by the researcher. A point of

divergence in the application of SA method in this study was the collaborative relational mapping by the researcher and participants in considering relationalities between the data drawn from each participant's first interview. During the second interview, these maps simultaneously acted as both a method of data collection and analysis. The Author proposed that this additional technique enhanced the trustworthiness of the study through member checking, and offered an opportunity for the participants voice to be heard as they articulated their own lived experience directly into the research. This small but significant element of the research design contributed to this study's ability to fill the need evidenced in existing literature for greater family stakeholder voice in ECEC collaborative partnership research. The resultant relational maps from each participant interview (example Figure 3) were later overlayed to elucidate commonalities and sites of silence during data analysis of the entire research situation.

Figure 3. Example of collaborative relational map by researcher and participant

Each relational link (seen as a line connecting words) stems from a significance in the data. It is important to note that the processes undertaken here in relational mapping is not the end product analysis but rather an illumination of points of interest, correlations, and controversy for further investigation [26]. Relational maps have the capability to identify opportunities for further research possibilities. For example, each line may reaffirm connections made in

existing literature, or might illuminate areas of opportunity for further investigation.

2.3.4. Social World/Arena (SWA) Map.

Concurrently to the situational maps (messy, ordered, and relational), the Social World/Arena (SWA) map began to develop from information provided through observation and interviews, literature, and research data. Inspired by symbolic interactionism [27] and akin to a meso-level consideration in an ecological systems approach, the SWA map categorises actors social worlds in the research situation [24]. These maps illustrate relations between social worlds, sites of action, and influences on the phenomenon under investigation. Distinctly postmodern, the permeable boundaries of the social worlds allow for fluid and bi-directional influence of the multiple social worlds encompassed in the arena. Importantly, social worlds are all of the same significance and therefore no one social world is provided more prominence over another [18], also in keeping with the postmodern roots of SA [22, 24]. The SWA map (Figure 4) helped make sense of contemporary circumstances, relationships and connections between social worlds, and the function of dominant or marginalised systems.
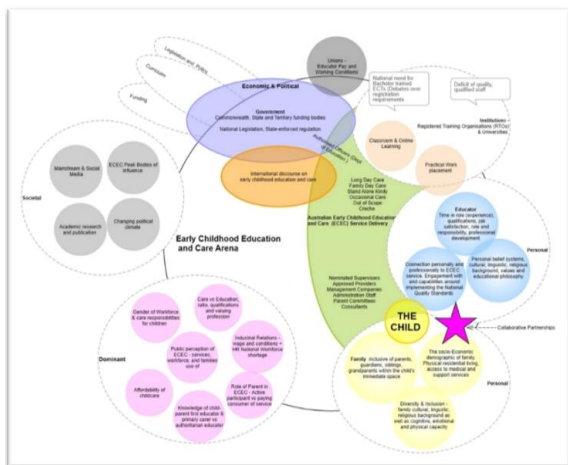
Figure 4. Social World Arena/Map of ECEC context

2.3.4. Positional Map.

The final cartographic map is the Positional map. This proved the most difficult, time consuming and deeply analytical piece of the situational analysis method (See Figure 5). It also yielded some of the most significantly meaningful outcomes. Positional maps not only highlight dominant positions, but importantly they highlight the silent data. They provide a visual representation of conflicts in the research situation [25]. Positional maps do not denote positions taken by individuals or social groups, rather the collective research situation. This deliberately reduces the versimplification of positioning issues and controversies in the research situation in a non-binary manner [24, 26]. It

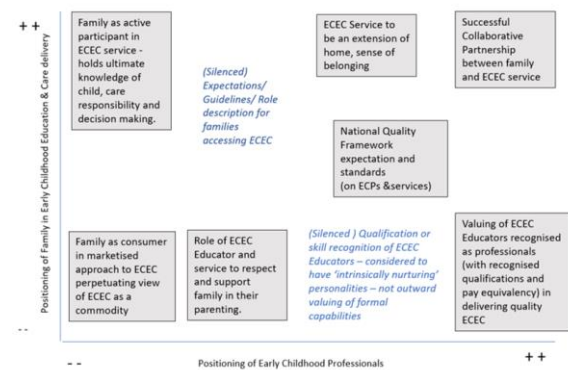exemplifies what Clarke calls sites of silence, that are present but remain unarticulated.

Figure 5. Positional map

3. Conclusion

This paper discusses the *process* of completing situational analysis in a poststructural case study research project. The findings and outcomes from this study are three-fold. Contributions to new knowledge will be offered methodologically, theoretically and in practice. The results have numerous implications for the Early Childhood field and are of too broader scope for specific inclusion here.

Situational Analysis served as a deeply cognitive analytical tool that challenged the researcher. The undertaking of each mapping task, and the deep connection between the researcher and their data was undeniable in this study. It provided a methodological integrity and high fidelity through participants active co-construction of meaning and knowledge, further braiding together the theoretical foundations of the study and the philosophical orientations of the researcher.

The research design enabled a drawing of conclusions from the data towards answering the research questions. Silences in the data have afforded for the illumination of further research opportunities. As a result, this study accomplished enhancements to the field in three ways:

- Firstly, the research design answered the call from existing literature for observational studies, and the escalation of parent voice in collaborative partnership research.
- Secondly, this study provided a methodological contribution to the application of situational analysis through collaborative relational mapping processes with participants. The use of SA cartographic mapping provided for a deeper understanding of the components and practices that fostered successful collaborative partnerships.

- Finally, this study's findings have culminated to create a future opportunity to develop a collaborative partnership model that can be extrapolated across international education curriculum frameworks and settings, offering a tangible guide for all stakeholders who participate in these services.

4. References

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