

Engaging in reflexivity as an educator-researcher to strengthen relationships in an outdoor early childhood education environment

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Abstract: Researchers with a dual-role must balance insider-outsider positions to build participant relationships. While researcher identity and reflexivity are explored in previous studies, a gap exists in analytic studies on researchers' reflexive engagement in early childhood. This study explores how an educator-researcher strengthened participant relationships in the outdoor early childhood education (ECE) environment through reflexive engagement by thematically analyzing their data collection journal. Findings indicate that prior ECE experience informs authentic connection with educators and children, and embracing a dual-role supports deep interpretations of relationships and developing trust. Educator-researchers may benefit from reflexive journaling to strengthen their understanding of relational positionality.

Keywords: Positionality; Early childhood education; Outdoor play; Reflexive thematic analysis; Qualitative research

Introduction

Research in outdoor play has been rapidly expanding within the context of child care settings, in part due to the recognition of potential opportunities to support child development and well-being (Larouche et al., 2019; Sandseter & Kleppe, 2019). Benefits of outdoor play are often focused on the contributions to children's health, well-being and development (de Lannoy et al., 2023). In researching outdoor play within early childhood education (ECE) programs, there is significant responsibility on the researcher to reflexively build relationships with participants to ensure results reflect the authentic context (Graham et al., 2016). At the start of engaging these relationships, the researcher must identify their relation to the qualitative research context to properly situate themselves within the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022), however, this detailed description is often absent from ECE research studies and in outdoor settings.

An ethnographic case study approach provides a unique methodology with detailed descriptions of relational interactions with the ECE community invited to participate in the research (Ritchie, 2019). Within an early childhood setting, ethnographic research can further support child-focused narratives to enhance children's voices (Köngäs & Määttä, 2023), as well as the use of visual methods to capture children's first-hand experiences and perspectives in research (Haywood-Bird, 2017; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Sudarsan et al., 2022; Waller, 2014). Situating the researcher to the context is especially important in ethnographic research with children considering the ethical and pragmatic implications of this work, as researchers gain access to unique knowledge and develop relationships with child participants (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to describe my (the first author's) dual-role of an educator-researcher within the broader study context of an outdoor ECE play setting (Hill & Dao, 2021). The findings presented are based on a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of my research journal kept during data collection within a broader project focused on increasing outdoor play opportunities at a child care centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Reflexivity in the Dual-role

The complexity of research identity and dual-roles has been examined across several disciplines such as clinical health, education, and sport, with several studies examining researchers' use of reflexivity (Barkhuizen, 2021; Hay-Smith et al., 2016; Hill & Dao, 2021). Being reflexive refers to a researcher's critical examination and reflection of their own beliefs and values along with guiding theoretical influences and their impact on engagement within the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A systematic review of clinician-researcher dual-role experiences have demonstrated consideration of the use of reflexive engagement (Hay-Smith et al., 2016). Using reflexivity in dual-role research positions has been used to navigate the balance of being an insider and outsider to the research context (Hill & Dao, 2021). To be an insider within a qualitative research context, a researcher will share status or lived experiences with members of the group being researched (Gair, 2012). Researcher reflexivity has further been argued as essential to

ethical practice in children's well-being, especially when involving their voices and perspectives in the study (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013).

Researchers may encounter complexities when conducting qualitative research in settings similar to their lived experiences (Hill & Dao, 2021). There are limitations of subjectivity and potential bias with closeness to the data, as researchers may have preconceived ideas based on their own experiences (Greene, 2014). Assumptions from participants on the researcher's identity may occur if a researcher is not transparent about their connections to the group (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Further, there are advantages of this research position including prior knowledge of the setting to support meaningful questions, intimate access, and familiarity with participants that supports authentic interactions (Greene, 2014). The methodological concerns emphasize the importance of researchers engaging in reflexivity while holding a dual-role (Hill & Dao, 2021). Using a reflexive lens on encounters with participants may support researchers' understanding of their position and identify pathways for clear connections. Gregory and Ruby (2011, p. 163) describe "the researched [...] is far more likely to perceive the distance of the present than the proximity of the past.", making the need for researchers to communicate their connections with participants evident.

Reflexivity in Qualitative Early Childhood Research

There has been less exploration of reflexivity in the dual-role in ECE research despite many researchers in this area coming from ECE professional backgrounds and applying this knowledge to their study contexts. In one example, an author discussed how they went through a process of 'becoming' within their educator-researcher practices through applying data collection practices in their own ECE profession as a doctoral candidate (Cooke et al., 2020). However, there have been more published studies on teacher-researchers and teacher-educators; this research has examined their own practice and the importance of building relationships with students in creating positive learning environments and explored tensions between traditional research constrictions on imperative self-inquiry of teachers sharing their pedagogical perspectives (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Han, 2016). The teacher and researcher roles have also been examined in the context of action research to acknowledge the value of educator and researcher perspectives in establishing collaborative research relationships (Bergmark, 2020) as well as a shifting perspective from a teacher-educator to doctoral researcher on a sense of self-supported meaningful research within their own community settings (Barkhuizen, 2021). Further investigation into educator-researcher experiences in ECE settings is needed, particularly to enhance the voices of young children using visual research methods to ensure their dignity, their informed participation and representation, and agency for respectful and ethical practice (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013).

Reflexive Journaling

In addition to locating researcher positionality, the researcher should engage in a constant and continuous process of reflexivity while building relationships with participants and collecting data by recording their thoughts and reactions in a reflexive journal (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The use of a reflexive journal can support researchers to deepen their critical reflection by creating an intentional practice of examining their own assumptions and interpreting their reactions to knowledge gained from data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Nadin and Cassell (2006) revealed their own positions on their research encounters by recording their emotions in a research diary after conducting participant interviews. This process of recording their encounters supported an understanding of themselves in relation to their study by journaling the concrete facts of their observations and their own emotional reactions and theoretical influences on their interpretation of the data (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). This understanding of the researcher's self and position needs to be further investigated in ECE environments to understand how researchers can align themselves to be in partnership with both adult and child participants. Developing partnerships between participants and researchers require relationships and trust to be established (McIsaac et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Broader theoretical assumptions guide the outlook on researcher positionality and subjectivity in various ways. This paper situates itself within the constructivist paradigm which positions the researcher as inseparable from the setting and participants they are conducting research with who have an active role in producing findings, while considering the subjective and socially constructed meanings associated within the context (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wahyuni, 2012). When conducting qualitative research with young children it is essential to understand how researcher roles impact the study, since the researcher acts as a main interpreter in sharing experiences (Shang Tang, 2006). Following the constructivist paradigm, my position as an educator-researcher is socially constructed within the early learning

environment in relation to the educators and children who participated. Logistical and reflexive positions are unpacked and interrogated to make meaning of the reflexive process related to participant relationship building. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) is employed to explore the tensions of my dual-role as recorded in a reflexive journal. The analysis sits within the experiential qualitative framework as I explore the perspective and experience of my process of building relationships with participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Purpose

Reflexive engagement has supported critical reflection on insider-outsider positions and relationship to participants (Hill & Dao, 2021) and the use of research journals have been an essential tool in examining self-values and theory to understand positions toward participants and contextual settings (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Nadin & Cassell, 2006). In this research, we discuss how being reflexive in a dual-role relates to building relationships in early childhood research settings, through answering the following questions:

1. What are the tensions recorded in my reflexive journal from visiting the child care centre that influenced that relationship building process?
2. How can reflexivity support researcher relationships with adult and child participants?

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the research journal is the most appropriate form of analysis to answer the research questions, because this process engages critical reflection of my role as a researcher in relation to the research context, process, and theoretical influences. Coding the journal to generate thematic results was supportive to making sense of how researcher-participant relationships were developed and strengthened throughout the study.

Methods

Author Positionality

As a new doctoral student, I approached this research role with mentorship from my primary supervisor who is an experienced early childhood researcher and closely connected to the ECE program studied (through a board role and as a parent). Additional co-authors were involved in broader project meetings, providing important experience from other projects in ECE settings with expertise in early childhood, health promotion, and kinesiology. I share similar professional and educational backgrounds with educators at the centre and was familiar with them from working on another research project. As the broader project worked with the ECE program using a participatory method (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), I was able to build relationships and trust with the children through play over time and as a result of my professional identity as an early childhood educator was often perceived by educators and children to be an insider rather than a visiting researcher to the children. The constructivist ethnographic approach (Wahyuni, 2012) in this project positioned me with children and educators as co-constructors of their situated knowledge about their unique outdoor play experiences.

Other logistical factors of my positionality, such as my cultural, political, and social positions of being a young female academic and white settler living in a rural area, impacted my relations with the child care centre. The child care centre's outdoor play space was the research setting, and my position as a white settler held significant implications to how I would relate to children and from what approach. For example, during an interview with a child, they started to rip bark off a tree during their exploration. I see my status as a white settler requiring the responsibility of listening and honouring Indigenous relational perspectives of caring for and respecting the land. I encouraged the child to relate to the tree because it was a living being that can feel pain too (e.g., likening the tree bark to skin). My positionality and how I choose to use it to relate to participants helped me to create a relational approach in not only respecting children's knowledge, but also the well-being of the land in Mi'kma'ki where we learn together. This approach aims to respect kinship relationality (Donald, 2021), as expressed in MacDonald et al.'s (2024) kinship literacies outdoors, where humans are deeply interconnected with all parts of the living world to disrupt colonial narratives of separation between children and nature.

Research Context

This study was approved by the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board, file #2022-010. An ethnographic case study (Yin, 2018) was employed with a university lab school/non-profit child care centre at an

urban university campus in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that provides high-quality care for children aged 18 months to 5 years old and supports student practica and professional research. The centre is located adjacent to a forest area with a large, fenced play area for children and broader access to the wider campus. The centre's high quality is attributed to their strong implementation of the province's early learning curriculum framework, which is a socio-pedagogical framework that views children as unique and capable learners (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2018). Given that the provincial framework focuses on positive and reciprocal relationships between educators, families, children, and their greater communities (DEECD, 2018), this project offered an opportunity for building relationships within the ECE setting through an ethnographic research method. Within the broader project's design, the outdoor playground was chosen for the research setting through a collaborative decision between the centre director and the principal investigator to explore how to increase outdoor play opportunities for children and educators with increased access to outdoor gear and resources. The focus of data for this paper is on my reflexive journal that was kept following weekly visits (over a period of eight months) to the ECE program. The outdoor play space was seen as a relational place for children, their educators, and me to interact throughout the broader project.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, I visited the child care centre bi-weekly, talking with educators and playing with children during their outdoor play time. After two months spent building relationships, I invited children (n=10) to participate in go-along interviews (Carpiano, 2009) that were recorded using GoPro action cameras on a chest harness to capture their visual perspectives on their outdoor play. The centre's outdoor playground consists of many natural features (e.g., trees, bushes, grass, a boulder, and various plant and insect life) and several wooden structures (e.g., a mud kitchen, an A-frame, a house) appropriately sized for children. Due to the open-ended and emergent nature of outdoor setting and the interviews, children were invited to become co-researchers through their play as they explored their space through the lens of the GoPro camera and shared their thoughts and ideas with me. I kept a reflexive journal to record my interactions and observations within the program and reflect these back on my positionality.

The main point of data for this study is my reflexive journal that included observations and interpretations of each visit. 34 journal entries were written over a period of eight months from October 2022 to June 2023. Following each visit to the centre, I journaled about my observations of interactions with educators and children on the centre's playground and how I collaborated with children to capture their visual perspectives through the lens of the GoPro action camera, noting any strengths or tensions of this process. I discussed my reflections on these visits with my supervisor. Our discussions enabled me to deepen my critical reflection and the tensions I experienced, which were also recorded in the journal.

Reflexive journals are a key part of an iterative process of reflexive thematic analysis that researchers use to reflect on their thoughts and queries throughout their research to support their data interpretation as it is "an ongoing process of reflection" (Braun & Clarke, 2022; p. 12). To be reflexive in research is to situate yourself in relation to the data context in terms of understanding how research is informed by one's prior knowledge and theoretical assumptions and avoids the misinterpretation of being neutral in relation to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Keeping a record of my interactions with educators and children, and observations of ongoing events in children's play, allowed for a strong interpretation of the dual-role educator-researcher context in this ethnographic case study setting.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was complete, the reflexive journal was analyzed following a reflexive thematic analysis that involved deep familiarization with my journal, generating codes which were developed into themes, reviewing these themes and refining them into pillars that tell the story of my positionality within this outdoor early learning environment (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Familiarization with data involved re-reading the journal before analysis to make notes of new ideas or reflections. Engaging in deeper reading of my journal supported a stronger understanding of the journal as 'data' when coding through an experiential qualitative lens. The collaboration between the co-authors helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis and reviewing from multiple perspectives and reflections of the data ensured a rigorous examination of the meanings within journal entries.

Results

The themes generated from my journal represent the findings of this research and are situated in an experiential qualitative framework that highlights the lived experiences and perspectives of those involved in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The following themes describe the strengths and tensions involved within my position as an educator-researcher in the outdoor early learning environment (Figure 1).

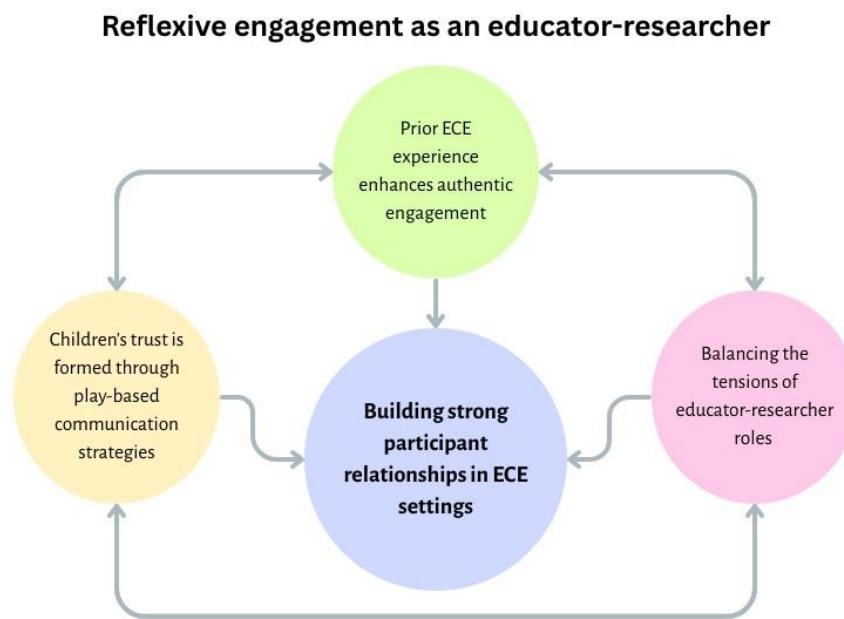


Figure 1: A visual representation of the thematic results.

Theme 1: Enhanced Authenticity is ECE-informed

My prior experience and existing knowledge as an educator influenced the process of building relationships with educators and children. I understood their daily routines and how educators may interact with children and prepare the outdoor environment following the provincial early learning framework. I did not approach this space as a neutral observer; my prior experiences and knowledge influenced my interpretation of interactions with educators and children. Approaching the early learning environment in this way supported my conversations with the educators and my ability to build relationships. I utilized my ECE experience to discuss their thoughts about outdoor play pedagogy by asking questions that referred to the actions of children we observed together. I understood the language associated with the provincial early learning framework that guides their practice. Having similar experience supported rapport and trust between myself and the educators, as I could pull from these experiences and relate to educators in conversations.

I was talking with [educator name] about the outdoor space and how they feel it lacks in being an extension of the learning space inside. They said it is because there are not designated areas for dramatic play, reading, quiet time, etc. in their outdoor space. Making meaningful changes to the playground requires input from educators for this to happen. We chatted about interests we have in common like nature school pedagogies and I sent them information about these courses and workshops. (Journal entry, November 3, 2022)

Some tensions were found in thinking primarily through a research lens and how this may impact the authenticity of children's experiences. I focused on collecting data following our originally outlined criteria for the length of children's interviews, while following the children's lead to collaborate with them and enhance their position as co-researchers. For example, there was one child with whom I built a strong relationship through play and did several interviews. Our team determined that 15 minutes was an appropriate length for interviews with children, but interview lengths increased as this child became interested in using the camera to document their own play. This was felt as a tension of keeping trust and fairness in our relationship as I struggled to decide whether to let children determine

interview lengths or end them myself. As an educator, I felt determined to follow the child's lead to provide them with agency over how they shared their play. My thought and decision-making process is both ECE-informed and reflexive in nature by considering the typical power dynamics that can present in relationships between adult researchers and child participants (Kostet, 2023), and how my actions could either continue or disrupt them.

Theme 2: The Balancing Act of the Dual-role

The confusion that I felt around my role as an educator-researcher in the outdoor ECE space is interpreted as a tension, as I felt that I was taking on the role of an extra educator. Taking on this dual-role resulted in a mindful balancing act of my engagement. I felt that I may have been taking on tasks that were misaligned with my researcher role. The following excerpt from my journal describes my own discomfort in supporting a small group of children through the situation of the exclusion of one child. For context, there were two children stacking milk crates into a wall formation around their bodies when another child tried to join.

Today I observed a child tell another child that they wanted them to go away when they made an attempt to join their play. I was observing them because they were using milk crates to build a “castle”, and I wanted to hear their conversation. I was unsure if I should intercept, but one child said they “hated” the other. I decided that due to the nature of the language and since I was the only adult near them, that I would ask them how they could ask their friend to give them space using kind words. I later checked in with an educator and they seemed okay with me stepping in and gave me more context on the relationship between the children. (Journal entry, November 3, 2022)

I found this situation difficult to navigate in my role because I intended to observe their play from a short distance and eventually be invited to join. When their play evolved into an argument and then into a situation of exclusion against one child, I needed to rely on my ECE experience to problem-solve with the children, which required that I step into their play. This tension between roles occurred because I was the only adult close enough to hear the children's conversations. I have interpreted that the educators likely allowed me to be near children on my own because of the trust I built with them, but also because they knew of my ECE background and may have assumed that I could work through a variety of situations with children. As tension, this often meant that I was pulled out of my research focus and into supporting and problem-solving. Consequently, I had to learn how to balance the role of a visiting researcher and a positive support role when necessary.

This situation further solidified me to be seen as an educator by the children because of my supportive yet firm demeanor in addressing the exclusion of one child. Using this example to illustrate, many children treated me similarly to their educators and came to me for support. This contrasted with my researcher role, as I was now not just a visitor who arrived with cameras and a focused purpose, but I was an adult who children could turn to when they needed support. Learning to balance these roles throughout the study strengthened my connection with the children and gave me further access to sharing children's voices, which is further discussed in the third theme.

Theme 3: Play-based Communication: An Essential Trust-Building Strategy

An identified strength was the trust built through consistent communication to strengthen relationships with participants. Unique to an ECE space, this involves communication with the director and educators, and time spent playing with children. Getting to know children through play created a trusting relationship and built my knowledge of them within their outdoor context. Below is an example of communicating my commitment to children's play as an effort to build trust:

When the preschoolers came outside, I was immediately pulled into play by a small group of children. I was told that I was to be a kitty and sit down. The children seem more comfortable with me and respond to my questions about their play. Since the children told me to stay, I thought that getting up and walking around the playground might break the trust I was gaining, so before I left, I let them know I was going and that I would come back. (Journal entry, November 8, 2022)

Communicating my actions and intentions to the children contributed to their trust in me, especially when I followed through. This is a typical component of most trust-built relationships, but an analysis of my journal highlighted how important it was that I communicated as openly with the children as I did with the educators because the children

expected reciprocity. My educator-researcher role was strengthened by building trust with children through communication and play. Playing one-on-one with children gave us time to talk about what they liked to do outside and tell stories through play.

Discussion

The process of building relationships in an ECE research setting as a reflexively engaged dual-role researcher was influenced by several tensions and strengths related to this duality. Most studies reporting on dual-role researcher experiences have not been conducted in early childhood settings or extensively describe the use of reflexivity in building relationships with participants, which is especially important when research aims to enhance children's voices (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). My ECE experience influenced the relationship-building process as it allowed for authentic interaction with children through meaningful questions and relating to educators through lived experience (Greene, 2014). I understood the common languages educators used, and knew when to support them (e.g., support transitions to the playground). It was important to communicate my shared professional background to educators so that they understood how we related to each other and could shift their perspectives toward seeing my role as an insider (Gregory & Ruby, 2011; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). I spoke with children in a way that was respectful, responsive and followed educators' practices and centre values, such as respecting certain boundaries and supporting problem-solving between children. I established connections through playful engagement with children. This aspect of relationality was achieved through an ongoing process in reflexivity bridging related experiences to connect with those in the research context (Greene, 2014). I would often write about assumptions of educators' actions and children's play based on my experience and examine these in relation to what was observed or learned from interactions with participants. Using this journal as an intentional space to reflect on engagement supported reflexive thought about the contextual and theoretical influences that shaped them (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Reading and re-reading these entries informed how relationships could be strengthened and how I could be invited into children's play.

Being positioned in the dual-role highlighted parallels between educator reflective practice and researcher reflexivity. As Hill and Dao (2021) describe the balancing act of being both an insider and an outsider is a careful balance of situating oneself between academic priorities and aiming to become further immersed within the research context. Further, there is an overlap between ECE reflective practice and researcher reflexivity. In the context of this research inquiry, the provincial early learning framework guides the reflective practice cycle to support educators' observation, documentation, and scaffolding of children's play (DEECD, 2018; Schön, 2017). The framework (DEECD, 2018) describes reflective practice that educators should engage in, which includes reflection in, on, and for action (Schön, 2017). An educator who engages in reflective practice may ask themselves intuitive questions about children's actions as they observe (reflection in action), and later reflect on these events (reflection on action). Further inquiry may be addressed by exploring their reflection of children's play compared with their own beliefs (reflection for action) (DEECD, 2018; Schön, 2017). Reflection for action closely relates to the exercise of researcher reflexivity as these approaches focus on critical examination of data or events while considering how one's values and beliefs impact their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; DEECD, 2018).

Bridging ECE-informed knowledge and practice with reflexive journaling highlighted how relationships with children were influenced by power dynamics within the data collection process. Ethical researchers are reflexive of their actions, of how they present themselves to children, and how to conduct research in understandable ways (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Because of my dual-role and informal presentation in the outdoor space, I was perceived as an educator by children. This perception may have minimized power imbalances in the researcher-participant relationship, as described previously (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013), but I had to remain in communication with the educators about my actions on the playground to ensure comfort and trust. Power imbalances in ethnographic research with children can become perpetuated from adult/child binary perspectives, but a shift in the researchers' approaches towards being with children and materials in these spaces is required (Dennis et al. 2020). My experience of being with children in their regular outdoor play space aimed to remove this binary perspective through joining children's play, however, they may have still perceived me to be an educator.

Children's autonomy and ability to lead the play during the interview were challenged by external conditions such as time limits and other children wanting turns to participate. Critical examination of the research design, my values and beliefs about children supported decision-making that honoured the trust earned. For researchers aiming to conduct similar studies in ECE settings, this research demonstrated the power of using a journal to enhance the

reflexive process and the comfort of young participants with engaging in research activities to better inform interpretation and analysis.

Strengths and Limitations

Engaging in a reflexive process was an asset in this research as it enabled reflection on interactions with the participants and consideration of how these relationships could impact interpretations of children's outdoor play. The reflexive journaling process strengthened the understanding of the educator-researcher position as a careful balance of roles that were often influenced by how the participants perceived the researcher in the setting. It is important to note the challenges for an adult to become an insider in children's play (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Since the intended purpose was for me to be there as a researcher, children viewed me in a similar position as their regular educators, and I was invited into their play how an educator may normally be involved. I became deeply involved in their play because I was not expected to carry out typical responsibilities of the educators, such as note-taking or photo-taking for pedagogical documentation. However, because I was not employed at the participating centre, I was not fully immersed with the program and had more limited knowledge on children's interests and regular activities to support building connections.

Implications and Future Research

There appears to be minimal exploration in qualitative early childhood research that specifically outlines this reflexive process in research, despite the ethical implications of research with children (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013) and filming children for the purposes of research (Chesworth, 2018). Several studies have used participatory methods or the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) to engage reflexivity in research relationships with young children without the focus on dual-role researcher experiences (Poppe et al., 2017; Rayna & Garnier, 2021; Stokes, 2020). Graham et al. (2016) urges researchers toward a culture of ethics in early childhood research through critical reflexive engagement and consistent examination of relational influences between the researchers and participants. Providing an in-depth description and reflexive engagement around the relationality between researchers and participants in qualitative early childhood research could support collaborations between researchers and participants and strengthen children's agency in data collection (Holland et al., 2010). Building a foundational relationship with children was essential to providing children with a sense of power in the decision of how we would end their interviews, as previously discussed. In this research, the foundational relationship was intentionally built through critical reflection on my interactions with participants. Further research should continue to explore the dual-roles inherent within early childhood settings, through reflexive journaling, and their related complexities that influence the pragmatics of data collection and ethics involved with amplifying children's voices.

Conclusion

Researchers must take time to build relationships within early childhood settings where they will conduct qualitative ethnographic or observational research. Being an 'insider' to the setting with similar lived experiences may not provide rich descriptions and understandings without first fostering positive connections with educators and children through trust and commitment. Part of building these relationships involves significant time spent in a reflexive process to ensure that the researcher is intentionally aware of their position in relation to the setting (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This paper addressed how engaging in reflexivity can strengthen researchers' relationship-building with participants as research partners. The themes generated identified that having prior experience in the research setting can inform authentic connection with participants, embracing the duality of the researcher's role can support deeper interpretation of participant relationships, and finding common communication strategies can create trust and support researcher-participant relationships. Findings may be transferrable to other early childhood settings where researchers may hold a dual-role that could enable authenticity and trust to build strong partnerships with participants.

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