EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS’ PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE: WHAT THEY KNOW, THINK, AND DO WITH YOUNG CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

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Dip.T. (Primary), B.Ed.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Office of Education Research
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology

2013
Keywords

Australia, children, divorce, early childhood, grounded theory, pedagogical practice, reflexive practice, separation, teacher knowledge, Victoria
Abstract

Societal changes have resulted in adjustments in attitude towards marriage, cohabitation, and commitment to relationships (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004). Parental separation and divorce involving children has become a common phenomenon in Australia. Recent statistics suggest there were one million dependent children living in Australia in 2010 who had experienced the separation or divorce of their parents (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012). Children have varying experiences and exhibit myriad reactions to parental separation or divorce. These reactions have implications for classroom teachers (Hetherington, 2006). With informed knowledge and thinking, teachers can use pedagogical practices to facilitate wellbeing and promote learning in young children who are experiencing parental separation or divorce (Miller, Ryan, & Morrison, 1999). This qualitative study explored the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers, and what they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

The systematic grounded theory design, as espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008), was applied in this study. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews and a focus group were used to explore the pedagogical practices of government school early childhood teachers in Victoria, Australia, regarding young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Findings have revealed that teachers engaged a complex, pragmatic, and reflexive decision-making process to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Key findings showed that teachers’ knowledge was informal and individual. Teachers have applied a range of reflexive
thinking techniques to their knowledge to inform their pedagogical practice. The actions of teachers focussed on constructing emotional, behavioural, and academic support for young children, as well as constructing partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members to assist them to construct support for children.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to the development of a pedagogical decision-making framework to inform teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. They will also contribute to scholarship by developing new knowledge about this phenomenon, as well as extending theoretical frameworks related to the thinking processes of early childhood teachers. Results from this study have the potential to influence policy by recommending consistent school policies and procedures within and across schools.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>AIFS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Family Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>DECD</td>
<td>South Australian Department of Education and Child Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEECD</td>
<td>Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training</td>
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<td>DET</td>
<td>Northern Territory Department of Education and Training</td>
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<td>DET</td>
<td>New South Wales Department of Education and Training</td>
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<td>DETE</td>
<td>Queensland Department of Education Training and Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>Western Australian Department of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGP</td>
<td>Focus group participant</td>
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<td>IP</td>
<td>Interview participant</td>
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet the requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: [Signature]
Date: 13/8/13
Acknowledgments

Many people have supported, provided guidance, and encouragement during the writing of this thesis:

Thanks to Associate Professor Kerryann Walsh, who has been my principal supervisor throughout the entire journey. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to her for sustaining and motivating me throughout. Her support and encouragement has been truly remarkable. To Professor Joanne Lunn and Dr Anne Petriwskyj, I wish to express thanks for their valuable and generous support, guidance, and wisdom. I will be forever grateful for my wonderful supervisory team. Appreciation too, goes to Dr Megan Kimber, for expert editorial advice.

Thank you also to the wonderful staff from the Office of Education Research (formerly Centre for Learning Innovation) in the Faculty of Education who were always on hand to assist in any way possible. Thank you to QUT for financially supporting me with the Postgraduate Research Award. To my peers, with whom I undertook this journey, thank you for sharing your stories of success and frustration and “cheering from the sideline.”

I am indebted to the participating teachers in the pilot study, interview participants, and focus group. Without their candid interviews, this study would not have been enlightening.

Finally, thanks to my wonderful family for their patience, understanding and never ending belief in me.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

The incidence of separation and divorce has become a part of relatively recent social life in the Western world, with as many as one in two marriages ending in divorce (ABS, 2012; Gähler, Hong, & Bernhardt, 2009; Office for National Statistics, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Not all children’s parents are formally married; not all children’s parents formally divorce following separation. Hence, parental separation is also common. The ABS (2012) estimated that, in the 12-month period from mid-2009 to mid-2010, 22 percent of all children under the age of 18 years had a biological parent living elsewhere, presumably as a result of parental separation and divorce. Approximately one million Australian children were estimated by the ABS to reside with a biological parent living elsewhere. Therefore, in an early childhood class, potentially one in five children may be experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Children experience various effects of parental separation and divorce, and may carry these effects into their classrooms. Although there is much research on the effects of separation and divorce on young children in general, there is little research relating to their school experiences, and even less research examining the kinds of knowledge, strategies, and actions their teachers apply when working with them. The aim of this study was to attempt to fill this gap. It is a qualitative in-depth grounded theory study of early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. The aim of this study was to generate greater understanding of early childhood teachers’ knowledge and thinking, and how
their knowledge and thinking influenced their pedagogical practice with these young children.

This chapter begins in section 1.2 by outlining the historical and societal context of the research. Terms used in this thesis are defined in section 1.3. In section 1.4, the need for the study are described by outlining the potential effects of parental separation and divorce on children, the absence of research to inform teachers’ work, and the implications for teachers in formal education settings. The research question is documented in section 1.5. The research design is outlined in section 1.6, followed by an overview of theoretical perspectives in section 1.7. A summary of the chapters in the thesis is in section 1.8.

1.2 Historical and Social Context of the Research

For decades, government policies have emphasised the importance of families and communities as the foundation of Australia’s future (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group, 2001; Hughes & Stone, 2003). In the Western world, the high incidence of parental separation and divorce, the concern for the numbers of children living without the benefit of both parents, and the well-documented effects of parental separation and divorce on children have prompted a focus on social policy involving family structure (Amato, 2004; Smart, 2004b). Maintaining the family unit, as well as supporting separated or divorced families, have been placed as a focal point in policies.

Family structure in Australia has raised political interest, with an underlying agenda to provide support to separating and divorcing families. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is an Australian government statutory agency involved in research to inform and shape future policy (AIFS, 2012). The AIFS recognises and promotes families as the foundation of communities, thus realising
the need to nurture and support the wellbeing of family members. Of particular interest in the latest AIFS research plan 2009-2012 is social trends involving family transitions, relationship fragility leading to separation or divorce, and supporting relationship wellbeing (AIFS, 2012). The present study addresses these Australian current research trends.

Policies from Australian states and territories with regard to the education of children from separated and divorced families differ considerably. While all education policies refer to consideration of the best interests of the child and the presumption of shared parental responsibility, these issues have been addressed in varying degrees of detail. Few policies make explicit reference to families experiencing separation or divorce. Furthermore, these policies are generally directed towards school principals and administrative issues. There is little guidance provided in these policy documents for classroom teachers, and little evidence of any provision for the education of teachers into the effects of parental separation and divorce or effective pedagogical practice in such instances. While all policy documents appear to provide an outline, few provide detailed suggestions, skills, and strategies for pedagogical practice to support and promote the learning of young children from separated and divorced families.

Teachers are in a strategic position to provide support and to assist young children to develop socially, emotionally, and academically. On a daily basis, teachers interact with young children who are experiencing parental separation and divorce. Indeed, during my own 18-year teaching career, I observed children exhibiting a variety of reactions in response to their parents’ separation and divorce. Nevertheless, I was often frustrated by the inconsistent ways in which young children experiencing parental separation and divorce were interacted with in schools, and the
lack of professional development available to assist teachers in their work. Reflecting on my own experience, this process of piecing together my own knowledge about parental separation and divorce, searching for and finding fragments of information to help me work with the children, was repeated year after year with different children. I became attuned to and interested in their experience and was conscious that their situation seemed to be somewhat overlooked in schools. I wondered whether other teachers had similar or different experiences and how they managed the day-to-day pedagogical challenges of this work. When I became immersed in the literature, it appeared that there was little formal writing or theorising about how teachers come to know about the topic of separation and divorce or the particular experiences of young children. Apart from the small body of literature developed by researchers such as Cottongim (2002), Ellington (2003), King (2007), Luk-Fong (2011), Øverland, Størksen, and Thorsen (2013), and Webb and Blonde (1995), there was little in the literature about what teachers think, and how their knowledge and thinking coalesced to impact on their day-to-day pedagogical practice. This aim of this study was to address this gap.

Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce were explored in this study. In particular, what teachers know about the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children, and how teachers came to know about the reality of a young child’s family situation was investigated. What and how teachers thought about young children from separated or divorced families was also examined. Findings from this study were detailed to show how this knowledge and thinking informed early childhood teachers’ teaching practice when interacting with these young children.
The concept of the “know, think, and do” triad emerged from reading outside the field of education in the area of health psychology, where there is a substantial body of literature on what is referred to as KAP (knowledge, attitudes, and practices) studies. KAP studies collect information on what is known, believed, and done by practitioners in relation to a particular topic. Data generated from KAP studies are designed to identify practitioners’ knowledge, strengths and gaps, cultural beliefs and practice approaches that facilitate or act as barriers to professional responses (see for example Sequeira, Anup & Sriniuas 2000; Wan-Arfah, 2012). In this present study, however, I wanted to examine teachers’ thinking more broadly rather than focus narrowly on attitudes or beliefs, both of which can be problematic (Borg, 2001; Holtz, 2009). I was influenced by the work of Kos (2008) and Borg (2003), which focused on what teachers “know, think, and do” in relation to children with special needs. This present study, therefore, borrowed from their titles in generating the specific field of inquiry for this doctoral research.

1.3 Definitions

Several terms require defining, as these terms are used throughout this thesis.

*Pedagogical practice.*

“Pedagogy refers to that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions” (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002, p. 28). It is a broad term that takes in indirect teaching behaviours such as pastoral care, and forming and maintaining productive relationships, as well as complementing curriculum content, skills, and values children are intended to learn in the school setting (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The term *practice* denotes action or strategy (Johnson, 1989). *Pedagogical practice,* in
turn, refers to the strategies or practices that support learning. In the context of this study, pedagogical practice is defined as the “repertoire of pedagogical techniques that have been in some way tested and/or stood the test of time and experience” (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 29), that teachers refer to in their day-to-day interactions with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce in order to facilitate their learning.

From this perspective, this research is an exploratory study into the pedagogical practice of early childhood teachers when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. In particular, this study examined early childhood teachers’ knowledge and thinking, and how their knowledge and thinking influenced their pedagogical practice with these young children.

**Separation.**

*Separation* is the term referred to when there is a breakdown of the parental relationship, and couples cease to reside together (Halpenny, Greene, & Hogan, 2008).

**De facto living or cohabitating.**

*De facto living* (ABS, 2008b, p. 3) or *cohabitating* refers to couples, who do not have a registered marriage, residing together with an emotional commitment to each other (Bowes & Watson, 2004).

**Marriage.**

*Marriage* is the term used to describe the registered union of a couple (ABS, 2008b).
Divorce.

Divorce is the formal termination of a registered marriage in a court of law (Fine & Fine, 1994). A divorce is the point in time at which a couple’s marriage is legally terminated and at which time they are free to remarry (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003).

Process of separation and divorce.

In this study, it is acknowledged that parental separation and divorce are processes that may span many years (Dunlop, 1991; Potter, 2010; Strohschein, 2005). Findings of recent research suggests that the events leading up to and after parental separation and divorce can be a stressful time for children and their families, in addition to the event of the separation and divorce itself (Potter, 2010; Strohschein, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002). Therefore, when these phenomena are referred to as separation and divorce, it is intended to encompass all of the events leading up to and following the separation or divorce, as well as the actual moment in time when one parent departs the shared household.

Family.

The ABS defines a family as “2 or more people living in the same household who are related to each other by blood, marriage, de facto partnering, fostering or adoption” (ABS, 2008b, p. 3). Trends in de facto living, marriage, separation, divorce, and remarriage have led to a diversity of family forms (Schmeeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006). There are a wide variety of family types that include dependent children—couple families with children including registered married and de facto or cohabitating couples, one parent families, and step or blended families (ABS, 2008b). In this study, it was not considered necessary to distinguish between different family types because the families themselves were not
the focus of the research. Rather, teachers and their pedagogical practices were the focus. Accordingly, it was not necessary to distinguish whether children’s parents resided in a de facto or registered marriage prior to their separation or divorce, or to use this circumstance as a criterion for participation.

**Reflection.**

*Reflection* involves thinking back on what we have done, reasoning about it (Van Manen, 1991).

**Reflective thinking.**

*Reflective thinking* involves critical reflection about professional and personal experiences, where teachers understand their experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how they can use that knowledge to inform future practice (Stingu, 2012).

1.4 The Need for this Study

Empirical evidence has been used to show that parental separation and divorce can have short-term or long-term effects on children. British, American, Canadian, Swedish, and Norwegian research spanning from the 1950s to the present has been drawn on to show that parental separation and divorce may have adverse effects on some children. Research has also been used to show the effects for children may be felt to varying degrees, depending on a complex array of factors, which will be further explained in chapter two. Adverse effects of parental separation and divorce in children can result from parental stress factors related to the separation or divorce such as parental absence, predominantly by the father (Booth, Scott, & King, 2010; Menning, 2006), compromised parenting (de Vaus & Gray, 2003; Hetherington, 2006; Kelly, 2003; Tein, Sander, & Zautra, 2000), economic disadvantage (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Hofferth, 2006), and parental conflict (Harper & Fine, 2006; Pruett,
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce

Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Children construct their own reality in response to their parents’ separation and divorce, which, in turn, can contribute to the child exhibiting varying internalising and externalising behaviours (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, Golding, 2006). For some children, the consequences of parental separation and divorce can be detrimental to their social, emotional, and academic development. Parental separation and divorce, however, are not negative experiences for all children. Some children make positive adjustments to the adversities and develop satisfactorily emotionally, academically, and socially (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997; Moxnes, 2003; Winslow, Wolchik, & Sander, 2004).

While there is much research investigating the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children, there is a lack of research in this field that takes into account the complexities confronted by teachers on a daily basis when interacting with these children and their families. There are numerous studies documenting the effects of parental separation and divorce on children, in particular stress factors contributing to the various short-term and long-term effects, and the variety of internalising and externalising behaviours children may exhibit. There is, however, little research providing guidance for early childhood teachers in supporting the learning of such children. Morrison and Allen (2007) conducted a review of the literature to reveal useful strategies for teachers to use in order to promote positive adjustment in adolescent children experiencing a range of adversities. Morrison and Allen (2007) did not specifically examine the unique experiences of children experiencing the adversities related to the process of their parents’ separation and divorce. Nor did Morrison and Allen (2007) identify whether these strategies were common practice among teachers. Furthermore, there is little research examining
how teachers acquire knowledge about the family histories of young children from separated and divorced families, what knowledge teachers have or acquire about the context and effects of separation and divorce on young children, and how teachers apply their knowledge.

Other research investigating teacher knowledge and how it has been deployed has made incidental mention of interactions between teachers and children experiencing parental separation and divorce (Webb & Blond, 1995). Webb and Blond’s (1995) study, however, was not designed to explore the knowledge, thinking processes, and pedagogical practice of teachers of young children specifically experiencing parental separation and divorce. Rather, it was to examine teachers’ knowledge in general. Therefore, generalisations cannot be drawn from their study in relation to parental separation and divorce.

There is a gap in research literature that explores what teachers know and how they think about children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and if or how teacher-child interactions are guided as a result of teachers’ knowledge and thinking. By examining what teachers know, think, and do with children from separated or divorced families, the present study revealed processes of teachers for the purpose of promoting wellbeing and learning in young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed in an effort for teachers to promote positive adjustment (Pomrenke, 2007) that enable children an opportunity to develop their full academic potential.

Teachers can have an influential role in promoting the social, emotional, and academic development of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce (Miller et al., 1999). On a daily basis teachers interact with young children
who are experiencing myriad effects (both negative and positive) resulting from their parents’ separation and divorce.

There are particular educational implications for teachers of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Research has revealed that young children may be at risk of lowered educational attainment resulting from the effects of their parents’ separation and divorce (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; McIntosh & Long, 2005; Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Papp, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004). Therefore, it is imperative for teachers of young children to be knowledgeable about the implications of parental separation and divorce for young children and to have the skills to apply their knowledge to make informed pedagogical decisions to promote wellbeing and learning of young children. Teachers have a key role in supporting and assisting young children and their learning at school. There has been little research examining teachers’ knowledge, thinking, and actions with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Such research must take into account the complexity of family relationships and children’s often-unpredictable reactions.

This lack of research has given rise to the current study of early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Specifically, this study examined early childhood teachers’ knowledge and thinking, and how their knowledge and thinking influenced their action with these young children (aged three to eight years) from their kindergarten year to the early years of formal schooling.
1.5 The Research Question

The identified gap in the research literature suggested the need for further research to investigate the knowledge, thinking, and pedagogical practices of teachers. The research question for the study reflects this need.

What characterises the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce?

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the research question is deliberately broad and exploratory because teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce is under researched and not well theorised at this point in time. The specific domains of teachers’ pedagogy of interest in this study centre on what teachers know, think, and do with these children. To answer this research question, the study draws on grounded theory as a systematic and rigorous methodology to explain a process, in particular the process of interactions among people (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

1.6 Research Design

A grounded theory design was applied in the present study. Twenty-one individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview were analysed using the systematic design for grounded theory methodology espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Data were derived from semi-structured interviews with 21 Victorian teachers working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and a focus group interview with a further five teachers, and one interview participant. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was for participants to discuss their experiences with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce in
relation to pedagogical practices in the classroom. Through open-ended and prompting interview questions, teachers were encouraged to reflect on aspects of their knowledge acquisition, thought processes, and teaching strategies with these young children. The focus group had a dual purpose (a) gather additional data, and (b) confirm the findings of the study.

Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) grounded theory methodology was used to analyse data. Their version of grounded theory methodology is based on the theoretical perspectives of interactionism and pragmatism (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within these views, when interpreting events and situations, people reflect on prior experiences and interactions. These interpretations assist people to actively create meaning in their world (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007) and to respond based on perceived meanings (Blumer, 1969). These perspectives are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of reflective practice (Schön, 1995), whereby people reflect on prior experiences to inform their practice.

1.7 Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives were integral to this present study. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provided the overarching theoretical perspective for exploring the influences of interconnecting contexts and interactions between early childhood teachers and young children. Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment model provided a way to understand divorce. In Amato’s (2000a) model, parental separation and divorce are acknowledged as stressful events to which children and adults make adjustment. Drawing on components from Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice, in this study, teachers were viewed as reflexive practitioners.
1.8 **Overview of Thesis Structure**

Chapter one has provided the backdrop to the research, an overview, and rationale for the study. It has explained the historical context of the research and the need for the study. The chapter also presented the research question, and an overview of the research design and theoretical perspectives.

A detailed literature review is provided in chapter two. The background for the study is set by examining the incidence and prevalence of separation and divorce. The literature regarding the social context of separation and divorce is reviewed. Next, the review of the literature examines the various effects of separation and divorce on children. The implications of parental separation and divorce for schools and teachers are considered. A review of the literature revealing various theoretical perspectives that were applied in this study concludes chapter two.

The study’s research design is examined in chapter three. The theoretical perspective influencing the methodology is detailed. An overview of the development of the evolution of grounded theory methodology is provided. Details of participants, recruitment, data collection strategies, data analysis, and evaluating the quality of the data follow. Ethical considerations conclude the chapter.

The key findings of the study are presented in chapter four. The central category that emerged from the data was *early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogic decision-making process*. The central category represents the main theme of the findings. Around the central category are three major categories teacher *knowledge, teacher thinking*, and *teacher action*. Six main findings relating to these categories emerged from the data. These are
1. Participant teachers gained knowledge regarding young children experiencing parental separation or divorce from various informal sources.

2. Participant teachers expressed substantial but idiosyncratic knowledge of parental stress factors regarding parental separation or divorce and the impact on young children.

3. Participant teachers were frequently not formally informed of young children’s family circumstance, of the phenomenon, or how to respond to children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

4. Pedagogical decisions were informed by participant teachers’ reflexive thinking that was related to the unique characteristics of specific individuals and their family circumstances.

5. Participant teachers engaged in a range of pedagogical practices to construct emotional, academic, and behavioural support to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances.

6. Participant teachers formed partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members and organisations to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances.

In chapter five, which focuses on analysis and discussion, interpretations of the key findings are presented. The chapter remains focussed on the central category, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogic decision-making and the study’s three major categories, teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action. This
Chapter further examines key themes identified from these categories (a) teachers’ informal and individual knowledge, (b) reflexive thinking, and (c) pragmatic action.

Chapter six contains a concluding discussion on the findings of this study. The contributions, strengths, and limitations of the study are identified. Recommendations emerging from this study are provided. Finally, implications of this study are explored.

1.9 Chapter Summary

Historical and societal attitudes toward separation and divorce have changed over time. As a result, increasing numbers of young children in Australia are experiencing the process of parental separation and divorce (ABS, 2012). Young children may experience adverse effects resulting from parental separation and divorce and bring these effects with them into the classroom. Teachers are significant adults in children’s lives. Therefore, it is important for there to be greater understanding of the impact teachers can have on the lives of these young children. This study addresses a significant gap in existing research relevant to early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The grounded theory that emerged from the data describing teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making process was the culmination of this study. The next chapter provides a detailed review of the relevant literature.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

In the field of grounded theory, the timing for conducting the review of the literature is disputed (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). Classic grounded theorists, Glaser and Strauss (1967), advocate delaying its conduct until after data collection and analysis to avoid the analysis being shaped by other studies. Glaser and Strauss (1967), however, also acknowledge that no researcher enters the field without some background knowledge. Birks and Mills (2011) claim the literature has relevance at all stages of a grounded theory study. In the present study, a preliminary literature review was conducted to enhance researcher sensitivity (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and to establish the gap in the research literature that the study aimed to fill (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The review of the literature was then left to “lie fallow” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166) until after the data had been analysed.

This chapter begins by examining the prevalence of parental separation and divorce, particularly in Australia (section 2.2). A description of the social context of this study is provided in section 2.3 where the historical evolution of various family types is outlined. In this section, the change in societal factors and attitudes towards separation and divorce, and how these factors and attitudes have created an interest in the family from a legislative context are examined. Next, section 2.4, is an overview of the consequences of separation and divorce. The literature on parental stress factors that have impact on children and the adverse short-term and long-term effects of parental separation and divorce on children’s wellbeing and learning has been reviewed. Research literature that documents the positive effects of parental
separation and divorce on the wellbeing of children and factors contributing to positive adaptation is also reviewed. Section 2.5 details education policy contexts by examining Australian state education policy provisions for teachers working with children from separated and divorced families. Next, in section 2.6, research literature about teachers’ work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce is explored in terms of what teachers know, think, and do. The related substantive theoretical frameworks and concepts informing this grounded theory study are examined in section 2.7. This chapter synthesises a range of issues to identify implications from the literature and their importance for this study.

2.2 The Prevalence of Separation and Divorce

While divorce rates have remained stable over the last 30 years, many countries have reported that, on average, one in two of all marriages end in divorce (see Table 2.1). In the United States of America, the U.S. census bureau (2012) reported that 55 percent of marriages in 2009 ended in divorce. In the United Kingdom, the office for national statistics (2010) reported that 54 percent of marriages ended in divorce in 2007. Eurostat (2011) reported 44 percent of marriages ended in divorce across Europe in 2009. In Australia, in 2010, the ABS (2012) reported 42 percent of marriages ended in divorce. Recent statistics indicate that divorce rates are relatively consistent across countries in the Western world.
Table 2.1
Comparison of Marriages and Divorces of Selected Western Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Crude Marriages Per 1000</th>
<th>Crude Divorces Per 1000</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Office for National Statistics (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Eurostat (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>ABS (2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The crude marriage rate is the annual number of marriages per 1,000 population. The crude divorce rate is the annual number of divorces per 1,000 population (ABS, 2008a).

These figures (Table 2.1), however, do not include the separation of married or de facto couples. Not all children’s parents are formally married. In Australia, de facto relationships have increased in recent decades and overall marriage rates have decreased (Heady, Warren, & Harding, 2006; Qu & Western, 2008). The ABS (2012) reported the number of births occurring outside of registered marriages has increased over the past two decades from one fifth of all births (22 percent) in 1990 to one third of all births (34 percent) in 2010. Similarly, not all children’s parents become formally divorced; hence, parental separation is also common. Separation can occur for parents who have never formally married or formally married parents prior to formal divorce. Statistics on the extent of parental separation are not readily available as data on divorce; therefore, researchers must rely on different but broadly related information to understand its prevalence. In Australia, the ABS only reports...
on official divorce rates and does not report separations of married or de facto couples. With the increase in cohabitation of couples in Australia, divorce rates are no longer an accurate measure of stability or instability of couple relationships (Gray, Qu, & Western, 2008). The ABS (2012) reported, however, of the divorces in Australia in 2010, 49 percent involved children under the age of 18 years. This rate has remained stable over the past decade. It is estimated that in the 12-month period from mid-2009 to mid-2010, one-in-five children (21 percent) under the age of 18 years had a biological parent living elsewhere, which amounts to just over one million Australian children (ABS, 2012). Therefore, in an early childhood class, potentially one-in-five children may be experiencing parental separation or divorce. Early childhood teachers can potentially have an impact on the learning and wellbeing of the 21 percent of the population of Australian children who are experiencing parental separation and divorce. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be greater understanding of the pedagogical practices that can facilitate these children’s progress at school. This study provides rich information from teachers’ perspectives about their daily work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

2.3 The Social Context of this Study

The social context of separation and divorce is examined in this section. The history of societal factors that have contributed to an increase in the rates of separation and divorce across the Western world during the past century is traced. The prevalence of separation and divorce has prompted legislative interest to provide support for families.

This study is set within a social context wherein rates of separation and divorce have gradually increased and stabilised at relatively high levels, particularly over the
past century, in countries in the Western world. The historical context is important because, even though separation and divorce is now a common occurrence, it was not always the case. In the United States in 1910 less than one percent of marriages ended in divorce (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006), compared with 55 percent in recent times (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This increase has been gradual, with a dip during the Great Depression of the 1930s, a spike in 1946 with the dissolution of hasty pre-war marriages, a trough in the 1950s and early 1960s, and a sharp rise during the 1970s with the advent of the no fault divorce (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). These general trends are also evident in other Western countries including Australia. Hewitt, Baxter, and Western (2005) used data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey to conclude the social pattern of marital dissolution in Australia is similar to other Western countries.

American social demographers, Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007), suggest that changes in attitudes towards marriage have contributed to relative instability in marital relationships. In the 1950s and early 1960s, a survey of college students revealed marriage was highly valued because it provided a stable financial position, a home, and was necessary for raising children. Between 1960 and 1990 surveys revealed changing attitudes towards and greater acceptance of divorce (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Reflecting these changes in attitudes, more recent surveys of college students reveal that, rather than focussing on traditional practicalities of marriage, (providing a stable financial position, a home, and a context in which to raise children), they prefer to focus on more personal agendas to find love and emotional fulfilment for themselves via marriage (Barich & Bielby, 1996).
In the 1970s, the introduction of laws regulating marriage dissolution such as the no fault divorce in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia saw an upsurge in divorce. Prior to the no fault divorce legislation, the often very private reasons for divorce were revealed to the courts and one person held responsible. It has been argued that greater social acceptance and the ease of obtaining a divorce have contributed to an increase in divorce rates over time (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Changes such as amendment of divorce laws, high rates of marital breakdown, and flexible attitudes to marriage and de facto relationships have seen a growing acceptance of the practice of de facto living (Poole, 2005). The ABS (2008a) reported an increase in couple’s cohabitating from 16 percent of couples in 1975 to 77 percent in 2007. Several explanations have been proposed. Couples may view de facto living as a way to test their union before formalising it through marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Individual members of a couple may have experienced their own parents divorce and opt for a cohabitating relationship rather than formal marriage (Gähler et al., 2009). Cohabitating is no longer considered deviant and it is generally more widely accepted (Poole, 2005). The HILDA survey provides longitudinal data about households and family life, income, employment, life satisfaction, health, and wellbeing. It reveals, however, that de facto relationships are less stable than marital relationships (de Vaus, 2004; Heady et al., 2006; The University of Melbourne, 2012). Lower stability of marital relationships is thought to be due to the non-committal nature of de facto relationships.

The changing patterns and attitudes towards divorce and cohabitation have resulted in differences in family structure. Families remain the foundation of Australian society (ABS, 2012; AIFS, 2012). Maintaining the family unit by
preventing marriage breakdown (Australian Government, 2004) and providing support for families experiencing separation and divorce continues to be the subject of Australian government policy. The AIFS is an Australian government statutory agency involved in research to inform and shape policy (AIFS, 2012). The AIFS recognises and promotes families as the foundation of communities, thus realising the need to nurture and support the wellbeing of family members. Of particular interest in the latest AIFS research plan outlining directions for 2012-15 are social trends involving family transitions such as: family change, functioning, and wellbeing; social and economic participation; child and family safety; and services to support families (AIFS, 2012).

When separation and divorce occurs, it is not suggested that this means the end of a family (Ahrons, 1994; Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). Rather, with shared residency of children and co-parenting, families can continue to function and provide for the needs of their members. Epstein (2011) identified seven functions of families (a) economic, (b) daily care, (c) socialisation, (d) recreational, (e) self esteem, (f) affection, and (g) educational and vocational needs. In the event of separation or divorce, the family may not meet one or a number of these needs. The Australian government acknowledges these family functions as important, as indicated by their focus in planning documents for Australia’s primary agency on family relationships.

In 2006 significant changes were made to the Family Law Act 1975 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975) in the form of the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). This amendment provided extensive new provision, stressing the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility after separation or divorce, and consideration of the
best interests of the child with a focus on less adversarial proceedings when a parenting order is set. Included in the current AIFS research plan is a plan to build on the Family Law Act by continuing to investigate issues relating to separating families, such as outcomes for children and families, as well as recognising the obligations of cohabiting relationships outside of legal marriage (AIFS, 2012).

2.4 The Consequences of Separation and Divorce for Parents and Children

Much research literature has focussed on the influences and impact of parental separation and divorce on children. First, detailed in section 2.4.1, are the short-term and long-term effects that parental separation and divorce may have on children and their learning. Next, in section 2.4.2, the parental stress factors relating to parental separation and divorce are examined—parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict. Factors contributing to the positive adjustment of children who have experienced parental separation or divorce have been detailed in section 2.4.3. Section 2.4.4 provides a summary of this section.

2.4.1 Impact of parental separation and divorce on children.

The impact of parental separation and divorce on children has received much research interest for many years. Research spanning six decades continues to indicate that children experiencing parental separation or divorce may display lower behavioural, emotional (Babalis, Xanthakou, Papa, & Tsolou, 2011; Cheng et al., 2006; Potter, 2010; Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, & Brown, 2012; Strohschein, 2005), and academic outcomes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Sun & Li, 2011) when compared with children living in intact (ABS, 2008b) families; that is, a couple family including biological and adopted children of both parents. The impact of parental separation and divorce can affect children over an extended period, continuing into adolescence and adulthood.
Some adult offspring of separated and divorced parents may experience lower educational achievement (Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Sun & Li, 2009), greater unemployment, a heightened risk of psychological issues (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006), and difficulties in social (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008) and marital relationships (Amato, 2006; Gähler, et al., 2009; Hetherington, 2003; Størksen, Røysamb, Gsessing, Moum, & Tambs, 2007; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a large scale meta-analysis of 92 studies involving over 13,000 children. The aim of the meta-analysis was to address contradicting results in the body of literature regarding the impact of parental divorce on young children. Their findings were based on studies conducted between 1950 and 1980. The aim was to compare the outcomes of children from separated and divorced families with the outcomes of children living in intact families. The results confirmed that children of divorced parents scored significantly lower in wellbeing, academic achievement, behaviour, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social relations, and the quality of relationships with their parents when compared with children with married parents. A decade later this meta-analysis was revisited, with a focus on a further 67 studies published in the 1990s. The findings of this second meta-analysis were that child outcomes had not differed greatly across the decades (Amato, 2001), supporting findings from the original study.

During the further decade since these meta-analyses were conducted, there have been numerous studies examining the behavioural, emotional, and academic outcomes of children, many confirming Amato and Keith’s (1991) findings. Other large-scale longitudinal studies include the British Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). A sample of 5,635 families were examined over a
three-year period to establish the behavioural and emotional state of young children, aged four to seven years who were experiencing parental separation and divorce. Mothers completed questionnaires at two points in time during a three-year period. During this period, 346 mothers had separated from their partners. Data were analysed and compared between separated and intact families. The study found that children from separated and divorced parents showed an increase in behavioural and emotional problems (Cheng et al., 2006).

In another longitudinal study, Strohschein (2005) used the first three cycles of the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to track a sample of 2,819 young children aged between four and seven years. Over a four year period, Strohschein compared the mental health of children whose parents had remained married with children whose parents had separated and divorced (n=167). Data were gathered through interviews with parents. Results showed that children who had experienced parental separation and divorce exhibited higher levels of anxiety, depression, and antisocial behaviour throughout all stages of the divorce process when compared with children who had remained in intact families.

Another study exemplified the behavioural and emotional outcomes of children from separated and divorced parents. Babalis, Xanthakou, Papa, and Tsolou (2011) conducted a comparative study between 60 preschool aged children, aged four to six years in the Greek island of Rhodes in 2010. The behavioural and emotional outcomes of 30 children from separated and divorced parents were compared with the behavioural and emotional outcomes of 30 children who lived in intact families. Twenty-one teachers participated in interviews to determine their perceptions of the effect of single parenthood on young children’s adjustment. Results showed that teachers identified 53.3 percent of children from separated and divorced parents as
having emotional and behavioural problems. Teachers described young children’s behaviour as being energetic, aggressive, not participating in class, lacking concentration, having speech difficulties, and communication problems.

While many studies have examined the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children as perceived by their parents or teachers, Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland, and Brown (2012) explored the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce from the perspective of five-year-old children. Seventeen children from divorced parents and 20 children living in intact families participated in a sorting activity whereby children sorted cards with visual pictures that contained sensitive subjective content to identify those that best represented their feelings. Analysis of children’s sorting of cards in this study found the cards of children from separated and divorced parents were characterised by sad and lonely feelings or a mixture of feelings. They concluded that children experiencing parental separation or divorce were more anxious about their family, were more distressed, and displayed more angry feelings when compared with children from intact families. Young children in this study confirmed the perceptions of their parents and teachers regarding their adjustment to parental separation or divorce from other studies.

These studies established the emotional and social challenges of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The impact of parental separation and divorce has also been linked to diminished academic outcomes in young children. Recent research literature suggests the emotional impact of parental separation and divorce has a flow-on effect onto children’s academic outcomes. Potter (2010) analysed data from the American Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) to examine the psychosocial wellbeing of young children, and the relationship between divorce and children’s academic achievement.
Results showed that divorce diminished children’s psychosocial wellbeing from kindergarten through most of their primary school years. Diminished psychosocial wellbeing was linked to low academic results, irrespective of other stress factors related to divorce.

Other studies have also found that parental divorce during childhood was associated with lower levels of academic success. Steele, Sigle-Rushton, and Kravdal (2009) examined data from the Norwegian Population Register, the Population Censuses, and Statistic Norway’s Educational Registration System to explore the educational outcomes of 197,638 children who had experienced parental divorce. They found large differences in the educational attainment of children who had experienced family disruption in the form of divorce, when compared with the academic achievement of children from intact families. Sun and Li (2011) compared the academic performance of American children from kindergarten through to grade five from divorced and intact families using five waves of panel data from 8,008 children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K). They found that children from divorced families performed lower academically on average than children from intact families.

The effects of parental separation and divorce can have long-term effects on young children. Researchers have also showed that some young children carry these adverse effects with them through adolescence and into adulthood displaying an increased risk of lower educational levels, which leads to unemployment and lower socioeconomic attainment, psychological adjustment problems, and marital instability (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001).

A long-term effect of parental separation or divorce is lower educational outcomes and adolescents leaving school earlier, both of which can adversely affect
earning capacity. Ermisch and Francesconi (2001) analysed data from the first five waves of the British House Panel Survey (1991-1995) to compare outcomes of young adults who had experienced parental separation or divorce as young children with children who had remained in intact families. Ermisch and Francesconi (2001) concluded some young adults had lower educational levels, a higher risk of unemployment, and a higher risk of psychological adjustment problems. In particular, this study concluded most of the unfavourable outcomes were linked to parental separation or divorce when the child was aged between zero and ten years.

In another study, Sun and Li (2009) examined three waves of panel data from 7,897 adolescents in the American National Education Longitudinal Studies (NELS) to compare academic progress of adolescents from divorced parents with adolescents from intact families. The adolescents in the study had experienced parental divorce in early childhood. Results of this study showed that adolescents from divorced families make less academic progress during adolescence when compared with adolescents who have never experienced parental divorce. These researchers also documented that adolescents from separated or divorced families can, at times, fail to complete school (Amato, 2006; Hetherington, 2006).

Failure to complete education and absences from school may have a cumulative effect. Adolescents who fail to complete education may have compromised skills and educational ability (de Vaus & Gray, 2003), which limits employment and personal income generation, and may lead to living in poverty (Menning, 2006). Schools and teachers have a role in supporting young people, beginning with young children, to maintain engagement in education, particularly following the separation and divorce of their parents. An aim of this present study was to fill this need by uncovering the pedagogical practices teachers applied to
facilitate wellbeing and promote learning in young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

In addition to the effects in childhood and adolescence, parental separation and divorce can adversely affect the psychological adjustment of young adults. Barrett and Turner (2005) interviewed a sample of 1,803 young adults (18-23 years) in a South Florida community. They concluded young adults from divorced families showed higher levels of depressive symptoms, when compared with young adults from intact families. Another study was conducted in Norway with a sample of 8,984 adolescents (13-19 years) who had experienced parental divorce during childhood using data from The Nord-Trøndelag Health Study. These researchers also found parental divorce was a contributing factor to adolescent problems such as anxiety and depression, a lower feeling of wellbeing, and more school-related problems when compared with children from intact families (Størksen et al., 2006).

Children who experienced parental separation and divorce may have trouble in adult relationships. In a twenty year longitudinal study, Amato (2006) traced the effect of parental divorce, and in particular the effect of parental conflict related to divorce, on children after they had reached adulthood. Amato revealed that children who were subjected to frequent parental conflict reported psychological and marital problems in their own lives. Amato noted that children who had been exposed to parental discord between five and eleven years of age were at the greatest risk of being unable to develop effective social relationships.

Another longitudinal study examined by Hetherington (2003) also reported the instability in the marriages of young adults who had experienced parental separation or divorce as children. Hetherington studied the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR). The sample consisted of 450 families with a
four-year-old “target” child at the start of the study. Families were studied through annual telephone interviews and biannual family status forms. By the time the target child was 32 years of age, 76 percent had married and over one quarter had subsequently separated and divorced. Likewise, Gähler, Hong, and Bernhardt (2009) used Swedish longitudinal data from questionnaire surveys with 1,321 participants to analyse the impact that parental divorce had on the intimate relationships of their children in adult life. Findings revealed that children who had experienced parental separation and divorce were at 40 percent greater risk of their own relationships breaking down, when compared to adult children whose parents had not divorced.

Yet another large-scale study in Norway compared the likelihood of marriage and divorce among the adult children of divorced parents. Data were analysed from a sample size of 37,230 using questionnaire data from The Nord-Trøndelag Health Study and population registries. Findings concluded adult children from divorced parents delayed marriage or did not marry at all. Of those who did marry, there was a higher incidence of later divorce, when compared with offspring from intact families (Størksen, Røysamb, Gsessing, Moum, & Tambs, 2007).

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) also explored the adult relationships of 131 Californian children who experienced their parents’ divorce when they were young (between three and eighteen years old). The researchers used interviews to explore the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the adult children of divorced parents over a 25-year span. Data were compared with a group of adults from intact parents. The results showed that adults from divorced parents encountered difficulty in their own marital relationships.

In tracking the effects of parental separation and divorce through childhood to adolescence and adulthood, it is clear that children’s age at the time of their parents’
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separation or divorce is an important consideration in understanding how parental separation and divorce affects children’s wellbeing. There is evidence to suggest that young children show more long-term adjustment difficulties, compared with children who are older when their parents’ separate or divorce (Amato, 2006; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991). Hetherington (1989) suggested that, in comparison with older children, young children may be less capable of realistically assessing the cause and consequences of divorce, may feel more anxious about abandonment, and may be less able to take advantage of resources outside the family to cope with the divorce. In America, half of the one million children from divorced parents that make up the annual divorce rate are aged six or under at the time of their parents’ separation (Norval Glenn, personal communication, November 1991, as cited in Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Statistics such as these are not available in Australia. Divorce patterns are similar in America and Australia, therefore, it can be presumed the age of children when parents separate and divorce is also similar.

**Summary of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children.**

There has been considerable interest in the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children in recent decades and this phenomenon continues to be a focus of interest to researchers. This review has outlined the large body of research literature, including many large-scale longitudinal studies, that consistently indicate parental separation and divorce can adversely influence young children’s behavioural and emotional wellbeing, and academic progress. The adverse effect of parental separation and divorce has also been repeatedly showed to linger into adolescence and adulthood, particularly when children experienced parental separation and divorce in early childhood. Given the large body of literature on the adverse effect of
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce on children, it is this group of children that continues to be of concern, particularly for teachers who spend the most time with children each day, apart from their parents. The parental stress factors related to separation and divorce that may contribute to the adverse impact on young children are detailed in the next section.

2.4.2 Parental stress factors.

Parental stress factors that influence the wellbeing and learning of young children include parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict. Commentators of separation and divorce claim that these stress factors have greater impact on young children rather than the actual event of their parents’ separation and divorce (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000). Each of these four identified stress factors will be discussed in turn.

Parental absence.

The most notable and sudden effect of parental separation and divorce is parental absence from the family home. Children’s fathers are predominantly the absent parent. The ABS (2008b) reported that 82 percent of children from separated or divorced parents are likely to live with their mother, rather than their father, following parental separation and divorce. Furthermore, father-child contact has been showed to diminish following parental separation and divorce—within two-three years following parental separation or divorce, 18-25 percent of children lose contact with their non-resident parent, which is predominantly their father (Cheadle et al., 2010).

The absence of a father figure because of separation or divorce has been linked to diminished self-esteem, delinquency, substance abuse, and school failure. Surveys from 9,686 adolescents who participated in the American longitudinal study, the
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, showed that adolescent children who had a quality relationship with their father, regardless of whether they resided together or not, reported higher self-esteem, greater academic achievement, less delinquency, and less substance abuse than adolescent children with absent or disengaged fathers (Booth et al., 2010). Similarly, Menning (2006) used data from two waves (2,983 participants) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and concluded adolescents, whose fathers were completely uninvolved, were at greater risk of school failure.

Many studies have shown children adjust more readily to their parents’ separation and divorce when they maintain close and supportive relationships with their non-resident parents. Amato and Gilbreth’s (1999) meta-analysis of 63 studies showed a clear association between children's wellbeing and the extent to which non-resident parents engaged in authoritative forms of behaviour, such as talking with children about their problems, providing emotional support, helping with homework and everyday problems, setting rules, and monitoring children’s behaviour. More recently, these findings have consistently been replicated by Carlson (2006), Harper and Fine (2006), and King and Sobolewski (2006).

**Compromised parenting.**

Following parental separation and divorce, the researchers have identified that parenting can be compromised by three important factors parental distress, a reduction in supervision of children, and non-authoritative parenting. In the literature, the term used is compromised or diminished parenting (Kelly, 2003). Compromised parenting because of separation or divorce has been linked to adverse emotional, academic, and behavioural outcomes in children.
First, parental distress associated with separation and divorce can result in the reduction of the quality of parenting in the short-term and long-term. A reduction of quality parenting can have a negative effect on parent-child relationships and children’s adjustment to their parents’ separation or divorce (de Vaus & Gray, 2003; Hetherington, 2006; Kelly, 2003; Tein, Sander, & Zautra, 2000). Separated and divorced parents tend to become preoccupied with dealing with their own stressors and transitions. Hetherington (2006) suggests that, immediately following separation and divorce, mothers become less attentive and affectionate, more irritable, harsh, and inconsistent in discipline. Recent studies have linked parental distress resulting from separation and divorce with young children’s emotional insecurity (Kouros, Merrilees, & Cummings, 2008; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007) and maladaptive skills (Harper & Fine, 2006; Pruett et al., 2003). As part of an American longitudinal study, the Oregon Divorce Study-II, children from separated and divorced parents in grades one to three underwent achievement testing and their teachers completed ratings. Results linked compromised parenting resulting from parental separation and divorce with diminished academic achievement (Martinez & Forgatch, 2002). Other studies have also linked compromised parenting with children’s adverse externalising and internalising behaviour (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Harper & Fine, 2006; Meadows et al., 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Papp et al., 2004; Pruett et al., 2003; Tein, Sander, & Zautra, 2000; Whiteside & Becker, 2000; Wood, Repetti, & Roesch, 2004). There is strong evidence to suggest that living with a distressed parent after separation and divorce may prompt compromised emotional, academic, and behavioural adjustment in children.

Second, as Hetherington (2006) argued, children in separated and divorced families may experience reduced parental supervision compared with children in
intact families. Reduced parental supervision may occur because of increased periods of parental absence from home. Financial strain may force mothers back into the workforce (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). While employment may improve their financial situation, an adverse affect can be a reduction in supervision of their children. Some research has linked this supervisory scenario to delinquent behaviour (Acs, 2007). Unlike two parent households, where childrearing and breadwinning activities ideally can be divided allowing more time for the children (Acs, 2007), single parents have the burden of undertaking all roles in running the household alone (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009), leaving less time available for supervising or spending time with the children.

Third, some non-resident parents assume a non-authoritative parenting style, preferring to be seen as the ‘fun’ parent who takes children on outings and avoids disciplining children. Amato and Gilbreth’s (1999) meta-analysis investigating the influence of non-resident fathers and children’s wellbeing revealed that non-custodial parents who took an active role in their children’s lives and engaged with them, had greater influence in promoting academic success in their children than disengaged parents. Decline in parenting and the home environment may lead to the well-documented negative outcomes for these children (Amato, 2000b).

**Economic disadvantage.**

Economic disadvantage is a significant stress factor, as parental separation and divorce is often marked by a sudden reduction in family income. A reduction in family income can result in children needing to move house and change schools. Children not only experience the stress related to the process of the separation or divorce of their parents, but they also may experience added stress by moving away from their friends and support systems when they change neighbourhood and school.
(Amato, 2000b; Kelly, 2003). Moving schools can cause disruption to young children’s education. In Moxnes’s (2003) Norwegian study, 37 percent of children had to leave the family home as a result of their parents’ separation and divorce. Moxne (2003) showed that, on average, children from separated and divorced families who also changed residence showed less positive development when compared with children from intact families.

Parents who are separated or divorced have the expense of running two households, leaving less money available for education expenses. Money may be used to pay for essential living expenses of rent or mortgage, food, electricity, and gas. There is likely to be less money available for single parents to provide educational resources (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Hofferth (2006) drew on data from the American 1997 longitudinal study, Child Development Supplement (CSD) to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), to investigate the cognitive adjustment and behavioural problems of young children aged between three and twelve years from 2,380 households containing 2,563 children. Hofferth (2006) revealed differences in cognitive achievement between children from parents who were separated and divorced, and children from intact families. They concluded the differences in achievement were related to economic factors.

**Parental conflict.**

From evidence in the research literature, it can be concluded that high levels of parental conflict surrounding separation and divorce may be a stress factor that might be damaging to the well-being and academic development of young children. A meta-analysis of 12 studies showed that high levels of parental conflict was associated with more adjustment problems for young children (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Moxnes (2003) examined parental stress factors from the perspective of
children. Ninety-six children aged between eight and eighteen years participated in in-depth interviews. The majority of children spoke about witnessing high levels of conflict between their parents before, during, and after the divorce. These children spoke of having sad and angry feelings. Carlson and Corcoran’s (2001) longitudinal study showed children with environments that were low in parental conflict, had fewer behavioural problems and scored higher on cognitive tests. Other researchers showed parental conflict relating to separation and divorce was related to children’s wellbeing and adjustment (Harper & Fine, 2006; Pruett et al., 2003). These researchers also suggest that parental conflict was a factor resulting in reduced contact with the non-resident parent, as non-resident parents were more likely to withdraw from their children in the face of high levels of conflict. Similarly, Babalis, Xanthakou, Papa, and Tsolou (2011) found that the degree of parental conflict impacted on young children’s relationship with their absent parent. Specifically, when parents had a positive relationship with minimal conflict, their children also developed a positive relationship with their absent parent. This positive relationship between parent and child was reflected in children’s higher academic performance.

**Summary of parental stress factors.**

Researchers have showed that parental stress factors resulting from separation or divorce may have adverse effects on young children’s wellbeing and learning at school. Parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict have been identified in the research literature as particular stress factors for parents, which can have an adverse impact on young children. Parental separation and divorce, however, is not always a negative experience for young children. The research literature that points to the positive adjustment of young
children to parental separation and divorce, and the factors that promote positive adjustment of children is detailed in the next section.

2.4.3 Children’s positive adjustment.

The adverse effect of parental separation and divorce has been well documented in the research literature, and has been detailed in sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 of this review. Evidence from the research literature indicates 25 percent of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce experience significant ongoing difficulty in making positive adjustment to their parents’ separation and divorce, while 75 percent of children make adequate adjustment and experience minimal ongoing adverse effects (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lamb et al., 1997; Moxnes, 2003; Winslow et al., 2004). The factors contributing to the positive adjustment of young children to their parents’ separation or divorce are examined in this section. The aim of this study was to examine early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. An understanding of the factors that foster positive adjustment is imperative for teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Children’s positive adjustment to their parents’ separation and divorce is dependent on many factors. Pedro-Carroll (2005), an American researcher, collated and identified factors from the research literature that can be modified to promote positive outcomes for young children. These include individual factors, family factors, and extra-familial factors, as illustrated in Table 2.2. Individual factors refer to the unique characteristics of individual young children such as temperament, coping skills, and having a realistic and positive outlook for the future. Family factors that promote positive outcomes of children experiencing parental separation or divorce include positive family relationships, economic stability, psychological
wellbeing of parents, and family support. Extra-familial factors include factors external to the child and family such as the support network of people, a supportive environment, and support programs. Each of these factors will now be elaborated.
Table 2.2

*Modifiable Protective Factors Identified in Research on Children and Divorce*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Factors</th>
<th>Family Factors</th>
<th>Extra-familial Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Family relationships:</td>
<td>Support network:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive parent-parent relationship low in conflict</td>
<td>• Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cooperative and consistent parenting relationship</td>
<td>• Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive parent-child relationships</td>
<td>• Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping skills</td>
<td>Economic stability</td>
<td>Supportive structured day care centres and schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic and positive outlook</td>
<td>Psychologically healthy parents</td>
<td>Formal support programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Individual factors.**

American researchers Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, and Curran (1999) studied the effects of children’s temperament on their coping and psychological wellbeing following parental separation or divorce. A sample of 223 mothers were interviewed and completed a questionnaire to classify their children’s temperament. These researchers suggested that children with a positive outlook adjusted more readily to their parents’ divorce. Characteristics of a positive outlook included actively coping with the stressful event, displaying problem solving skills, minimal depression, and fewer conduct problems.

British researchers Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, and Murch (2003) examined children’s coping skills through interviews with children aged between
nine and twelve years. They found some children dealt with their emotional stress alone, sometimes through quiet reflection, having a private cry, or escaping the emotion of the situation by watching television or sleeping. Other children turned to physical activities to vent their emotions such as sport or active play, while others had tantrums. In a previous study, in their four-dimensional model of coping, Sandler, Tein, and West (1994) referred to some of these types of behaviours as avoidance or distraction dimensions of coping. Similarly, children in Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, and Murch’s (2003) study seemed to cope by accepting their circumstances.

**Family factors.**

Sandler, Miles, Cookston, and Braver (2008) studied the links between the wellbeing of children with the relationship of their absent parents and inter-parental conflict. One hundred and eighty-two divorcing families who had children aged between four and twelve years were interviewed. Results of this study showed that warm positive relationships between parents and their children, and low levels of conflict between parents, contributed significantly to the wellbeing and positive adjustment of young children. A similar study conducted by American researchers Harper and Fine (2006) also confirmed the link between healthy relationships between parents and their children and low levels of inter-parental conflict contributed to children’s wellbeing and adjustment. Yet another study conducted by Waldman-Rich, Molloy, Hart, Ginsberg, and Mulvey (2007) also found the removal of parental conflict, providing consistent nurturing parenting, and open channels of communication enabled children to make positive adjustments to parental separation and divorce.
When parental conflict has been removed and parents communicate amicably, parenting can also improve. Cooperative and consistent quality parenting following separation and divorce is an important factor in facilitating positive outcomes of young children. Amato, Kane, and Spencer (2011) conducted a cluster analysis of data on post-divorce parenting from 944 families. They found that children whose parents cooperatively co-parented after divorce had the smallest number of behavioural problems. Clark-Stewart and Brentano (2006) suggested children make better adjustment when their parents give them attention and guidance. They recommended parents ensure children had early and regular bedtimes, do not spend all their time watching television, have appropriate supervision, get their homework done, and advised parents to discipline authoritatively.

Clark-Stewart and Brentano (2006) showed that children with serious psychological problems came from families who experienced a 50 percent reduction in household income following parental separation and divorce. They suggested that children have fewer adjustment problems if there is economic stability of family income. Similarly, children whose non-residential parents continue to support them financially tend to be less affected by their parents’ divorce (Lamb et al., 1997).

Living with a competent, psychologically healthy parent is a protective factor associated with positive adjustment of young children. Children adjust better when their parents are in good mental health and have made a recovery from their separation and divorce (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Lamb et al., 1997). Similarly, Kelly and Emery (2003) maintained that one of the best influences of young children’s positive adjustment rests on the psychological adjustment of the custodial parent and the quality of parenting provided by them, particularly when
custodial parents provide warmth, emotional support, adequate supervision and monitoring, authoritative discipline, and maintain age-appropriate expectations.

**Extra-familial factors.**

Extra-familial factors are factors external to the family. Just under half of the children in the study conducted by British researchers Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, and Murch (2003) had a support network of people to consult during their parents’ divorce. Those with support sought friends or members of their extended family to talk with for reassurance or advice, to spend time with as a means of distraction from what was happening at home, or simply to listen to them. Where parents remained on reasonable terms with each other, children went to them for support. Butler et. al. (2003) found that some children recognised that their parents were upset about what was happening and were concerned about upsetting them further if they voiced their concerns. Importantly, for this present study, half of the children in Butler et. al. (2003) study said they would talk to their teacher to have someone to listen to them. Most children wanted their teachers to be aware and understanding of their situation, and offer a means of support. Few children had sought support from other professionals such as a counsellor and telephone counselling services, as someone they could talk to about their parents’ divorce.

In another British study, the role of grandparents as support for children was examined in 192 families experiencing divorce. Each family had a four-year-old child. Parents and children participated in interviews and completed questionnaires in the *Avon Brothers and Sisters Study* (ABSS). Comparisons of relationships with grandparents were made between children from separated or divorced families, and other family types including intact and stepfamilies. These researchers showed that children who had closeness to their grandparents, particularly grandmothers,
displayed fewer adjustment problems (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002).

Outside of the extended family, day-care centres and schools that provided warm, structured, and predictable environments can offer stability and support for children experiencing a changing family environment, and inconsistent household routines and parenting (Øverland, Thorsen, & Størksen, 2012). Attentive friends and teachers can provide support for children experiencing their parents’ divorce. Hetherington (1989) found that the social and cognitive wellbeing of young children from divorced families was enhanced if children were in schools that provided explicitly defined schedules; rules; and regulations with consistent, warm discipline, and expectations. She found that children found security in a structured and safe, predictable environment, reducing the negative impact of parental divorce.

Studies examining the effectiveness of support programs for children experiencing parental separation and divorce have showed they can facilitate positive adjustment. Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, and Wyman (1999) conducted a study with teachers, parents, and young children in kindergarten and first-grade. Children who had experienced parental separation and divorce participated in a 12-session school-based intervention program, The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP). The program focused on providing group support by creating an environment where children could freely share their experiences, establish common bonds, clarify misconceptions, as well as teaching children coping skills. Data were gathered via teacher ratings, parent interviews, child self-report, and school health data before children commenced the program and again two years after children had completed the program. Findings showed children’s anxiety, misconceptions about divorce, and their behavioural problems, had reduced. Children exhibited increases in
their healthy adjustment at home and school (Pedro-Carroll, 2005; Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999).

Numerous community programs offer support for parents and children experiencing divorce. Bacon and McKenzie (2004) evaluated a selection of ten Canadian parent education programs. Results from a pre-test questionnaire were compared with a follow-up survey four months after parents (n=375) completed the program. Results showed a reduction in conflict between parents, which resulted in increased quality in parenting. Parental cooperation increased significantly. Other studies finding positive effects of parent support programs include a randomised trial of an average of five hours of mediation between parents (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001).

**Summary of children’s positive adjustment.**

The factors that can facilitate positive adjustment of children experiencing parental separation and divorce have been detailed in this section. By examining the literature relating to the positive adjustment of some young children to parental separation and divorce, a variety of modifiable factors were identified that can facilitate children’s positive adjustment. These included individual factors such as children’s temperament, coping skills, and a realistic and positive outlook; family factors including family relationships, economic stability, and psychologically healthy parents; and extra-familial factors including a support network of people, supportive and structured day-care centres and schools, and formal support programs. It appears vital for teachers to have an understanding of factors that can be modified to facilitate positive adjustment of children to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.
2.4.4 Summary of the consequences of separation and divorce for parents and children.

Recent literature suggests that 25 percent of children who experience parental separation and divorce display adverse behavioural, emotional, and academic effects both short- and long-term; yet many children are able to make positive adjustment. The large body of literature focussed on the adverse effects of parental separation and divorce on young children suggests that it is this group of children that cause concern for teachers. It is crucial for teachers and other professionals who work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to have an understanding of the modifiable factors that can influence the positive adjustment of children to their parents’ separation and divorce. Teachers can engage these modifiable factors when working with these children. The role of schools and teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce is examined in the next section on education policy.

2.5 Education Policy Contexts

Separation and divorce in Australia have consequences beyond the family and may involve teachers. The Australian National Curriculum, guided by The Melbourne Declaration on Education for Young Australians (The Melbourne Declaration), describes the vital role that schools play in promoting the wellbeing of young Australians. Of particular relevance to young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, highlighted is a shared responsibility between students, their parents and families, and the wider community, as well as the importance of quality early childhood education and care focusing on equity and high expectations for success of all children (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008). Teachers are often faced with challenges, however, when working with young children experiencing the
adverse effects of parental separation and divorce, as described in sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2.

### 2.5.1 Overview of school policies in Australia.

Each State and Territory in Australia has a governmental educational body that translates these laws and national policies into state policies to guide practice. Teachers and schools use these policies to guide the provision of education to children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Table 2.3 lists the educational institutions of the states and territories in Australia.
Table 2.3
*Educational Institutions of the States and Territories in Australia*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Institution</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education (DOE)</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Child Development (DECD)</td>
<td>South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Training (DET)</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Training (DET)</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Training (DET)</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE)</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following is an overview of these policies from each of the states and territories in Australia. There is a particular focus and detail on policies from the Victorian DEECD to provide the backdrop for this current study as this study was conducted with early childhood teachers within the Victorian state education system.

*Victoria.*

The DEECD is responsible for the learning, development, health, and wellbeing of all children, from birth to adulthood and operates within various
legislative frameworks. The DEECD’s vision for all Victorian children is set out in the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development: Every Child, Every Opportunity* (hereafter Blueprint) (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). The vision is for all Victorian children to be given the opportunity to thrive and grow into productive community members. To achieve this vision, authors of the Blueprint (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008) made provision for the improvement of learning and development outcomes, and the support of children and their families. Partnerships between schools and parents, families, and broader community services and businesses to support and promote children’s development and learning are valued in the Blueprint (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). The diverse needs of children and that some children may need extra or more individualised opportunities and support in order for them to achieve are recognised.

A health and wellbeing framework was developed to support the vision of the Blueprint (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). While there are no specific policies dedicated to children experiencing parental separation and divorce, the DEECD has policies for the protection and support of children generally. Policies informing teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce include the *Student Wellbeing Policy* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), *Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010), *Student Safety: Child Protection – Mandatory Reporting* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011), and *Health and Wellbeing Services* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012).
The Student Wellbeing Policy (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007) highlights the importance for children to be healthy, safe, and happy. Stated in this policy is the responsibility of all staff to promote a whole school approach outlining partnerships between school, parents, and the community to ensure the wellbeing of children by developing, promoting, restoring, and improving resilience. Strategies outlined relevant to the education of young children from separated and divorced families include inclusive teaching and learning, encouraging supportive relationships, involving parents, increasing awareness of the impact of trauma, providing counselling and support, assessing risks and identifying needs, and developing programs to improve skills (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007). These policies make general provision for all family types but do not specifically mention separated and divorced families.

The responsibilities of licensed children’s services, teachers, and schools are outlined in Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010). Defined in this policy are the principle roles and responsibilities of the Department of Human Services Child Protection, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, licensed children’s services, and Victorian schools. Working collaboratively to protect children based on the best interests of the child is a focus of these departments and services. Outlined in Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010) are physical and behavioural indicators for indicating physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, and family violence.

The policy, Student Safety: Child Protection – Mandatory Reporting (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011), provides for
the protection of children. Teachers and principals are mandated by law under section 184 of the *Children Youth and Families Act* (2005) (The Parliament of Victoria, 2005) to report incidences of abuse or neglect to child protection agencies. Relevant to this study is the mention of duty of care for teachers and principals to protect children from being subjected to abuse including sexual, physical, emotional, neglect, and family violence. This policy outlines indicators of child abuse and neglect such as those identified in *Protecting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010), and changes in children’s behaviour. Outlined in this policy are clear procedures for making a mandatory report. Part of this process includes referral to *Child FIRST* (Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Team), a community-based family service for children and their families to access the assistance they need (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011).

The *Health and Wellbeing Services* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012) policy has the purpose of ensuring schools have been informed about the available health and wellbeing services. Services available include student support services that assist children facing barriers to the learning and development through the provision of a range of support agencies such as psychologists, guidance officers, social workers, visiting teachers, as well as primary welfare officers who assist schools to support students at risk.

The scan of policies relevant to teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce in Victoria revealed a patchwork of policies that encompassed this phenomenon. Policy provided general guidelines for the protection and wellbeing of all young children including those children who are
experiencing parental separation and divorce. There was minimal mention, however, of the impact of parental separation and divorce or policy that informed teachers’ work with these young children. It would seem that teachers and schools have needed to piece together sections from related policies to find some guidance for this aspect of their work. Educational policy in the other states and territories of Australia reflected similar inconsistencies.

**Western Australia.**

The Western Australian Department of Education (DOE) policy document, *Family Court Orders in Schools* (Western Australian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), is focused on the *Family Law Act 1975* (FLA) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975). The *FLA* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975) and *Family Court Orders in Schools* (Western Australian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) features the meaningful involvement of both parents in children’s education when it is in the best interest of child. *Family Court Orders in Schools* (Western Australian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) provides general and basic guidelines directed towards principals outlining the responsibility of the school to provide each parent with information regarding their child’s education, providing there is not a court order to the contrary. There is no reference, however, for teachers and their day-to-day interactions to support the social, emotional, and academic needs of the young child experiencing parental separation and divorce. The DOE also has policies that address behaviour, welfare of students, child protection, duty of care, inclusive education, and students at educational risk.
**South Australia.**

The South Australian Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) publication, *Dealing with Family Law Issues in Preschools and Schools* (South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services, 2010), provides detailed guidelines for staff in preschools and schools when dealing with family law issues regarding separated and divorced families. Explained in this policy is the equal responsibility of parents, particularly that both parents have the right to be involved in decisions concerning their child’s education, providing there is not a court order to the contrary. Practical advice is provided detailing significant issues. Guidelines of administrative procedures and responsibilities of staff have been made explicit. There are not any specific guidelines, however, to inform teachers in their day-to-day work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The DECD also has policies that address behaviour support, child protection, student wellbeing, custody and access issues, duty of care by teachers, and mandatory reporting.

**Australian Capital Territory (ACT).**

in the *FLA* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975), with a presumption of shared parental responsibility, as outlined in the *Shared Parenting Act*, unless there is a court order to the contrary. The *Family Law Policy* (Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training, 2010) outlines the responsibilities and obligations of parents and provides detailed procedures for schools to follow when providing for the education of children from separated or divorced families (Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training, 2010). The DET also has policies that address child protection.

**New South Wales.**

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) policy document, *Family Law Related Issues* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2012), contains details of a multitude of family law issues including those arising from the separation and divorce of children’s parents. In this policy, an emphasis is placed on the best interest of the child as determined by the *FLA* (Office of Legislative Drafting Publishing, 2009). Particular mention is made of parental responsibility to keep schools informed of changes to family circumstance and equal rights for both parents in the absence of a court order to the contrary. The DET also have policies that address financial assistance, counselling, behaviour, student welfare, and child protection for all children.

**The Northern Territory.**

The Department of Education and Training (DET) in the Northern Territory has minimal policy to address the education of children from separated and divorced families. The policy document, *Family Law* (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, 2002), is focused on policy relating to family law proceedings where teachers may be required to provide evidence. There is no
mention of the day-to-day management of children from separated and divorced families. The DET also has policies that address safeguarding the wellbeing of children and the reporting obligations of school staff (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, 2009).

**Queensland.**

Queensland’s Department of Education Training and Employment (DETE) policy document, *Family Law Matters Affecting State Educational Institutions* (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2012a), focuses on school administration responsibilities and informs schools how to handle family law matters. The policy document alerts schools to the important point in the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parenting Act)* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) that a residence order alone does not alter the sharing of parental responsibility. Principals are encouraged to presume that each parent has joint parental responsibility unless there is a court order in place to the contrary. It is the parents’ responsibility to provide any subsequent variations of these orders. There is no mention, however, of a requirement to keep classroom teachers informed of children’s needs, or reference to educating teachers to the changes in family law that may have an effect on the children they teach. There is no suggestion for responsibility of administration personnel or parents to keep teachers informed.

The policy document, *Inclusive Education* (Department of Education and Training and Employment, 2006), reflects the values, ethos, and culture of a state education system committed to enhancing equitable educational opportunities and improved outcomes for all students. The role education can play in redressing social disadvantage and achieving social justice is addressed in this policy document. *Inclusive education* (Department of Education and Training and Employment, 2006)
requires that schools are supportive and engaging places for all students, teachers, and members of the school community. It is concerned with building communities that value, celebrate and respond positively to diversity. Respectful relationships between students, teachers, other education workers, parents, or carers underpin this policy document. It is concerned with shaping the society in which we live, and shaping the type of society to which we aspire. Inclusive education (Department of Education and Training and Employment, 2006) in Queensland intends to support all students to engage in the school, culture, curriculum, and community; and to maximise educational and social outcomes of all students through identification and reduction of barriers to learning.

The Learning and Wellbeing Framework (LAWF) includes strategies, guidelines, and links to information to support the wellbeing of students. In this policy, reference is made to schools acknowledging individual differences, providing consistent rules and consequences, providing pastoral care for students, and highlighting productive partnerships between students, teachers, parents and carers, support staff, and community groups (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2012b).

2.5.2 Summary of education policy contexts.

The educational policies in Australia, with reference to young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, differ considerably across the states and territories. All policies have been written within the guidelines of the FLA (Commonwealth of Australia, 1975) and the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Common to all policy documents is an emphasis of the paramount importance of consideration of the best interests of the child, and the presumption of shared parental responsibility. These
important principles, however, are addressed in various degrees of detail from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. They are directed, generally, towards school principals and administrative issues, rather than being aimed at classroom teachers. Although issues involving separated and divorced parents as partners in their child’s education are encompassed within existing educational policies, few policies specifically referred to separated and divorced families. Furthermore, no policy made mention of the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children, or the role of teachers when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The policies that do specifically mention parental separation and divorce present as ambiguous, and do not address the myriad of issues that may arise. While all policies appear to provide a basic outline, few provide detailed suggestions and strategies for pedagogical practice to support and promote the wellbeing of young children from separated and divorced families. This study will provide crucial insight into the issues teachers confront on a daily basis, which in turn will provide valuable data to guide educational policy development for dealing with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

2.6 Research on Teachers’ Work with Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce

Teachers are important because they have daily contact with children. They see the children for more time than any other adult or professional, apart from children’s parents, and in some instances may spend more time with a child than their parents. Teachers are in an ideal position, therefore, to notice any changes in behaviour that might signal that children are experiencing stress associated with their family life (Kelly, 2000). Teachers are also in an excellent role to assist children and to make sure their learning is maintained, regardless of what adverse circumstance they are experiencing. Minimal research has been conducted investigating teachers’ work
with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This lack of research has resulted, perhaps, in an absence of formal knowledge for teachers to call on to inform their day-to-day work. The existing research literature relating to teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, teacher action, and teacher decision-making about their pedagogical practices with children experiencing parental separation and divorce is examined in this section.

### 2.6.1 Teacher knowledge.

Due to the high divorce rates in countries in the Western world including Australia, there are considerable numbers of children in classrooms experiencing parental separation and divorce. Studies using teacher narratives have revealed that teachers’ knowledge of their relationship with children can prompt them to alter their pedagogical practices when interacting with individual children (Webb & Blond, 1995). It seems logical to assume that by having knowledge of the effects parental separation and divorce may have on young children, teachers may be better equipped to positively influence young children and promote their learning in school settings. There is a paucity of research, however, into what early childhood teachers know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

**Absence of formal knowledge.**

American commentators have recognised that effective teaching of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce requires teachers to have knowledge of the nature of the phenomenon in order to provide instruction to promote learning. Miller, Ryan, and Morrison (1999) suggested effective teachers have knowledge of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children’s learning. Research with teachers who interact with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, however, revealed teachers had little formal
knowledge of the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children. Kramer (1996) examined 25 American teacher training programs and found that, while there was some mention of parental separation and divorce, no program prioritised the topic in their training objectives. King (2007) conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with six Canadian teachers of young children aged zero-eight years. She identified ways in which teachers could promote young children’s learning. King’s (2007) small-scale study revealed that only one participating teacher had ever investigated the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children through professional reading, initiated by her to gain an insight into the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children. Other participants could verbalise their observations of child reactions that they assumed had resulted from the child’s experience of their parents’ separation and divorce. These findings supported results from prior studies conducted by Cottongim (2002) and Ellington (2003). Teachers in King’s (2007) study also identified the need for teacher professional development, support, and resources to support and promote learning in children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

**Teachers’ informal knowledge.**

Research has showed teachers and parents valued sharing knowledge regarding children’s family circumstance, however, teachers acquire this knowledge largely through informal means. Studies have revealed teachers considered communication with parents and other teachers as important to support young children experiencing parental separation and divorce (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). These commentators suggest that teachers acquiring knowledge informally may be an inadequate way to provide them with comprehensive knowledge of family
circumstance enabling teachers to support young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Researchers suggest parents consider it important to keep teachers informed of their family context. Cottongim (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 parents, 20 classroom teachers, and eight school counsellors to determine how parents, teachers, and school counsellors viewed the school’s role as a support for children experiencing parental divorce. Fifteen out of the twenty parents revealed they felt it necessary to keep teachers informed regarding parental separation and divorce. Reasons parents cited for keeping teachers informed included the role of the teacher as a resource for their children’s emotional needs, to monitor changes in behaviour, to understand financial strain, custody issues, and as a resource person for parents.

Researchers found that teachers valued communication with other teachers. Teachers in King’s (2007) study particularly revealed teachers of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce valued communication with previous teachers. Children’s previous teachers identified pedagogical practices that have worked with the particular child, and successful practices they had used with other children who had also experienced parental separation or divorce.

Other studies that found teachers’ knowledge was sourced informally exemplified the need for teachers to be informed of the family context. Ellington (2003) explored the effects of divorce on children and ways schools can offer support to children experiencing parental divorce. Of interest to the current study are the questionnaires of the eight teachers regarding their professional experience with parental divorce and young children. Participating teachers indicated they were usually aware of which children in their classes were experiencing parental
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Teachers suggested this knowledge was inconsistent and they often came to know informally. For example, one participant indicated knowledge of the family context filtered through to her informally by being a member of the school community. Other teachers interpreted differing surnames between parents and children to be indicative of family context. Another teacher spoke about probing children at the beginning of the school year by directly asking, “Who do you live with?” Other teachers gained information of family context directly from the children and their parents. Luk-Fong (2011) used teacher narratives of 30 primary school teachers from Hong Kong to investigate their perceptions of children’s experiences. It was shown that it was only when children’s problems became acute that they caught the eyes of the teachers. Luk-Fong (2011) also revealed the inadequacy of teachers helping children in ad-hoc ways such as trying to be a substitute father or mother; teachers’ concerns went beyond academic knowledge to their whole person development; and teachers had a positive relationship between teacher and child. Conclusions from this study addressed the need for teachers to receive training to become aware of the impact on children resulting from changes in family circumstance, as well as how to respond to children experiencing these family situations.

2.6.2 Teacher thinking.

Studies of teacher thinking in relation to parental separation and divorce are scarce. Findings of research with teachers of young children showed that teachers used reflection of their knowledge of parental separation and divorce to guide their practice. King (2007) revealed teachers reflected on their knowledge of children’s experience with parental separation and divorce, and modified practice to accommodate special needs. How a teacher interacts with knowledge of a child’s
experience with parental separation and divorce may influence pedagogical practice with the young child experiencing parental separation and divorce, in order to promote wellbeing and learning, Ellington (2003) showed one teacher reflected on her personal experiences with her own parents’ divorce when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

### 2.6.3 Teacher action.

Studies explicitly examining teachers’ actions in response to children’s family situations are also rare. The only research examining teachers’ responses in their day-to-day teaching that could be found are small scale doctoral and master’s dissertations by Cottongim (2002) and Ellington (2003). Participants in Cottongim’s (2002) study revealed many teachers had a strategy they referred to when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Researchers have detailed many pedagogical practices of teachers when interacting with these young children. Pedagogical practices included allowing the child to tell the teacher what they needed, displaying empathy toward the child, patience, maintaining routine and consistency, providing a supportive and secure environment, remaining impartial, being available for the child to talk to the teacher, giving extra special attention, and spending time with the child (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003). In cases with younger children, teachers acted intuitively. In one teachers’ experience with younger children, she found that younger children experienced difficulty expressing themselves. In these instances, the teacher needed to be there to provide emotional support and a hug if needed (Cottongim, 2002).

### 2.6.4 Teacher decision-making.

The field of teacher decision-making with regards to young children experiencing parental separation and divorce is a small but highly relevant body of research. There
are a limited number of studies and those that have been conducted report that teachers’ knowledge influenced their action. The following narrative illuminates the process teachers assumed to attain knowledge of their relationship with children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and how this knowledge influenced and altered their pedagogical practice. Webb and Blond (1995) interviewed teachers about their knowledge. In one particular narrative, a teacher focussed on a child whose parents were experiencing the process of divorce. The classroom teacher developed understandings and gained knowledge of the parental divorce from observations and interactions with the child, communication with the child’s mother and administration personnel, as well as her own beliefs and experiences. With this accumulation of knowledge, the teacher reflected on her previous action with this particular child. Through her thinking about the context and the phenomenon, the teacher gained understanding of this particular child’s experience with parental separation and divorce. As a consequence of specific contextual knowledge informing teacher thinking, the teacher modified her pedagogical practice when interacting with the child to cater for their needs to support and promote wellbeing and learning (Webb & Blond, 1995). Webb and Blond’s (2005) study raises the interesting question of whether the experience and approach of this teachers is more widespread or simply unique.

Researchers of another study with direct relevance to this present study suggest teachers apply a process of reflecting on their knowledge to inform pedagogical practice when working with children at risk of later academic failure. Lee and Walsh (2004) examined one American preschool teacher’s practice and her views of children experiencing family adversity. While their study did not specifically examine teacher pedagogical practice with children experiencing parental separation
and divorce, these findings have resonance for children who may be considered at-risk, at least according to the literature reviewed in this chapter so far. Analysis of data in Lee and Walsh’s (2004) study focussed on this participant’s critical reflection on her biography and the children in her class. The teacher made a point of providing compensatory education for children at-risk by teaching them basic skills, and helping them to succeed in school and later life. She emphasised providing a controlled and predictable environment and promoting children’s ability to take care of themselves. This teacher explained how she believed the children in her class needed to be able to control and predict their physical setting, their relationships with others, and their own behaviour, considering many of them were from unpredictable home environments in which they have little control. This teacher’s everyday practice was concerned with individualising education and using an array of her general teaching competencies to meet the needs of all children.

Insights into teacher decision-making that may be relevant for this present study can also be found with teachers in a Norwegian study. Øverland, Thorsen and Størksen (2012) suggested teachers applied a process when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. These researchers explored the responses of young children experiencing parental separation or divorce as perceived by 33 day-care staff. Participants described their observations of children’s responses in myriad ways from being insecure, sad, expressing sorrow, struggling to concentrate, frustration, anger, tantrums, attention seeking, difficulty following routines, changes in behaviour, and attachment to adults. One participant spoke about her observations and attributed these problems to be adverse responses to parental divorce. Participants viewed structure in the day-care centre created an environment where children could play and thrive, suggesting this may be absent from their life at
that point in time. Consequently, teachers aimed to provide structure and a safe environment for children where they could talk freely with their teachers. None of the participants in Øverland et.al.’s (2012) study had received formal training that specifically addressed parental separation or divorce, and only some spoke about relating similar professional training. Participants spoke about reflecting on their informal personal experiences with separation and divorce, and their experiences with children in the workplace to inform their decisions.

2.6.5 Summary of research on teachers’ work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

There is an emerging body of research investigating the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children that includes teachers’ perceptions of children’s emotional, academic, and behavioural adjustment following parental separation and divorce (Babalis et al., 2011; Luk-Fong, 2011; Molepo, Maunganidze, & Mudhovozi, 2010; Wood et al., 2004). Recent research literature suggests that teachers have minimal formal knowledge of parental separation and divorce. As a result, teachers have needed to rely on the knowledge they have acquired informally to guide their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. While the studies reviewed here provide insights, this review of the literature has revealed limited research that has specifically investigated teachers’ pedagogical practice with young children who have experienced parental separation and divorce. The studies conducted to date have provided scant evidence about what teachers know about separation or divorce and the effects on young children, how teachers come to know about young children’s reality with parental separation and divorce, and how this knowledge informs their pedagogical practice. Further research is vital to address this gap in research.
2.7 Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts Informing the Study

The opening comments to this literature review explained that, in keeping with a grounded theory approach, a broad literature review was conducted prior to data collection and analysis to establish the gaps in the literature and to develop sensitivity of the researcher to the topic. The point was made that traditional grounded theorists do not use predetermined theoretical frameworks to guide their studies (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While using a theoretical framework may be inconsistent with the basic principles of grounded theory, as interpreted by traditionalists, more recently Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that theoretical frameworks can and do have practical value in interpreting research findings. In a grounded theory study, the theoretical construction emerges from the analysis, specifically during the process of integrating categories, so that the theory developed in a grounded theory study is a logically structured set of ideas or concepts that can explain a phenomenon. The theory generated in a grounded theory study can be informed by existing substantive theories or it may be a completely new theory. Existing substantive theories informing this present study include Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory and Amato’s (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment framework.

This section has been re-written after data analysis and helps to further explain the grounded theory that emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this section, I will use the term theoretical frameworks to refer to existing substantive theories in the literature. When I refer to my grounded theory study, however, the term theory will be used.

Theoretical frameworks relating to family contexts are overviewed in section 2.7.1. Taking a broad view, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory has
provided a way to understand the various social influences on young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Narrowing down to this specific phenomenon, Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework has been used to understand the specific impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. Other theoretical frameworks relating to teachers’ knowledge and reflection are overviewed in section 2.7.2. In this study, teachers are viewed as reflexive practitioners. This perspective resembles Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice but with an added dimension of reflexive thinking to inform teaching practice. Reflection involves teachers thinking back on what they have done (Van Manen, 1991). Reflexivity takes reflection further. Reflexive teachers consider their professional and personal experiences, as well as having an understanding of their experiences in the social context. They have an understanding of how their accumulated knowledge can be used to inform future practice (Stingu, 2012). The theoretical ideas presented in this section encompass frameworks such as those that look specifically at the source and type of teachers’ knowledge, and how teachers think about their knowledge to inform their pedagogical decisions.

2.7.1 Theoretical frameworks relating to family contexts.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provided a backcloth to this study as a way of viewing the interconnecting relationship between various social influences on young children’s social, emotional, and academic development. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory is represented visually as concentric circles, as in Figure 2.1, and explains the child’s world as consisting of five systems of interaction:

1. Microsystem.
2. Mesosystem.

3. Exosystem.

4. Macrosystem.

5. Chronosystem.
Bronfenbrenner (1979) views the child at the centre of a nested system that, in turn, has multiple levels affecting the child (Bowes & Hayes, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). The child is part of a larger system that incorporates family, teachers,
school community, the wider community, political, cultural, economic, social, educational and legal influences from wider society, and historical contexts. Ecological systems theory argues that it consists of interconnected members, with each influencing the others to provide (or fail to provide) a healthy system. In this sense, a well-functioning system post separation and divorce is one that provides for the needs of children, who are at the centre of the system.

The first level is the microsystem that encompasses the child and their immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Green, Oswald, & Spears, 2007; Swick & Williams, 2006). For young children, the family, school, day-care centres, and community groups are their microsystem. The family circumstance and relationships between child and their parents can influence children’s wellbeing (Swick & Williams, 2006). In the context of parental separation and divorce, parental stress factors, (parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict), as identified in section 2.4.2, may influence the behavioural, emotional, and academic wellbeing of children in ways, as described in section 2.4.1. Conversely, well-functioning microsystems with protective family and extra-familial factors, such as those described in section 2.4.3, can be instrumental to influencing children’s wellbeing and positive adjustment to their parents’ separation and divorce.

The mesosystem represents the interrelationships between the settings in the microsystem. Mesosystems connect two or more systems in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the context of this study, that includes teachers, schools and school community members, and members from the wider community working with children and their families experiencing separation and divorce. Strong mesosystems can be empowering for young children when these systems provide quality support for children experiencing parental separation and divorce, such as the
extra-familial protective factors described in section 2.4.3, (support network of family, friends, and teachers; supportive structured day care centres and schools; formal support programs). Teachers, schools and school community, and resources from the wider community can provide a buffer to stress factors resulting from parental separation and divorce. The mesosystem is a major system in this study, as this study aimed to identify what early childhood teachers know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

A step removed from the microsystem is the exosystem. The exosystem includes settings external to the child. This system includes broader influences that impact (influence or delimit) on the immediate settings but do not contain the child, such as education policy or the absence of policy, health and welfare services, relations between school and community, and informal social networks which may trickle down to influence the wellbeing of children. These influences may include the implications of education policy to support children to thrive and grow into productive community members, as detailed in section 2.5. This may include formal governmental family support programs (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2012) that may have impact on family relationships.

The macrosystem does not refer to specific contexts or settings but to general attitudes and ideologies, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems of which the micro-, meso-, and exosystems are concrete manifestations (Bowes & Hayes, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). In this study, this could be the influence of the change in attitudes to separation and divorce and cohabitation through historical events, as described earlier in section 2.3.
The chronosystem represents societal changes over time that has influenced family relationships in Australia, as described in section 2.3—such as the Great Depression, the dissolution of hasty pre-war marriages, and the advent of the no fault divorce.

The arrows in the diagram represent the trickledown effect to impact on the child. For example, changing historical events has brought about changes in attitudes towards separation and divorce and cohabitation. This can influence family support programs, which in turn, can influence family relationships and the child’s wellbeing. The arrows are double-ended as the influences can work both ways with identified needs in the inner systems prompting changes or amendments in broader policies in the outer systems.

The following scenario illustrates the interrelationships between the settings in the microsystem, which is the mesosystem. Lee and Walsh (2004) described a teacher in their study who referred to children in her class as being “environmentally deprived” (p. 237) as a result of an accumulation of stress factors resulting from their family circumstances. In this instance, the teacher made a point of providing compensatory education for these at-risk children by teaching them basic skills and helping them to succeed in school and later life. In another study, teachers described children’s adverse responses to parental divorce. Participants viewed structure in the day-care centre to create an environment where children can play and thrive (Øverland et al., 2012). Providing structure and emotional support was something these participants could provide for young children outside of the family.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the systems that influence family functioning. Ecological systems theory offers an insightful lens for understanding and supporting children and
families experiencing parental separation and divorce. An understanding of the systems can influence early childhood teachers’ interactions with children and families experiencing parental separation and divorce. As detailed earlier in section 2.4, parental separation and divorce may place stress on the family that has impact on children’s wellbeing and academic development. This framework recognises other systems that can have impact on young children and their families to promote positive adjustment of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, such as those extra-familial factors described in section 2.4.3. It suggests concepts practitioners can use to empower relationships with families and other systems that are enmeshed.

**Amato’s Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Framework.**

Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework, as illustrated in Figure 2.2, is a useful framework to understand the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children and their families. Some of the concepts in Amato’s (2000a) framework have been reviewed independently in this chapter. The framework links these concepts together in an explanatory framework.
Commentators who apply the divorce-stress-adjustment framework acknowledge children may experience a decline in wellbeing during the process of separation and divorce, as mediators such as parental stress take effect. Importantly, in this framework, protective factors moderate children’s wellbeing as they adjust to their parents’ separation and divorce. While viewing separation and divorce through this framework may suggest it is a stressful process, the divorce-stress-adjustment framework also caters for the varying responses of individuals. The possibility that teachers and or schools may act as moderators or protective factors for children is encompassed in Amato’s framework.

Using Amato’s divorce-stress-adjustment framework separation and divorce are viewed as a process rather than a single event occurring at one point in time. Amato’s research, along with others who also view divorce as a process (Potter, 2010; Strohschein, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002) suggest that it is the process of divorce (Strohschein, 2005), with the stressors leading up to and following the actual separation or divorce, that has the greater impact on the wellbeing and positive

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outcomes of young children rather than the event of separation and divorce itself (Dunlop, 1991; Potter, 2010; Strohschein, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002).

Myriad mediators or stress factors inevitably go together with parental separation and divorce. Parental stress factors that impact on young children’s wellbeing and learning have been examined in detail in section 2.4.2. These included parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict. As seen in section 2.4.1, these mediators increased the risk of adverse short-term and long-term impact on the social, emotional, and academic development of children.

In Amato’s divorce-stress-adjustment model moderators are viewed as protective factors to provide a buffer to the mediators (or stress factors) and to promote the positive adjustment of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The positive adjustment of children varies from child to child and is dependent on the presence of a variety of moderating or protective factors namely—individual, family, and extra-familial factors, as described in section 2.4.3. This has synergy in the context of this study, systems in the microsystem and exosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory can be moderators or buffers for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

To illustrate, Hall, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2009) investigated the role of pre-school education as a protective factor in the development of children who were at risk. Cognitive development was measured in 2,857 English pre-schoolers at 36 and 58 months of age. They found the most important protective factor for children’s development was a strong relationship with a competent, caring, prosocial adult, which includes the teachers of young children.
The theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Amato (2000a) have provided a way to conceptualise the importance of schools and teachers. Schools and teachers can promote adjustment in children by developing social competence, increasing bonding between students and caring adults, communicating high expectations for students’ academic and social performance, and creating partnerships with families and community resources (Brooks, 2006). Other commentators have shown influences such as teachers’ actions and expectations, school-wide policies, classroom and school climate play a key role in promoting adjustment and motivating positive attitudes towards school (Green, Oswald, & Spears, 2007). According to Amato (2000a) successful adjustment occurs when children experience few divorce-related symptoms, as described in section 2.4.1, and are able to function in their new family arrangement, and at school.

The divorce-stress-adjustment framework with a focus on moderating factors (protective factors) is important to this study because teachers are in an optimal situation to act in a supportive role for children external to the family (Chen & George, 2005). Teachers see children for many hours on a daily basis and are in an ideal position to assist children and to make sure their learning is maintained regardless of what adverse family circumstance they are experiencing. Thus, teachers need to be aware of the positive influence they can have on the lives of young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

2.7.2 Theoretical frameworks relating to teachers’ knowledge and reflection.

Participant teachers in the present study have been viewed as reflexive practitioners. A number of existing complementing theoretical frameworks have been drawn on to provide a lens through which to view teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This section provides an
overview of the theoretical frameworks regarding the source and type of teacher knowledge. A detailed overview of various commentators who have influenced the theoretical framework of reflexive practice follows.

_Theoretical frameworks relating to teacher knowledge._

Teachers in this study have been viewed as reflexive practitioners. In order to engage in reflexive practice, teachers require knowledge on which to reflect. This section examines the theoretical frameworks relating to teachers’ source and type of knowledge. The work of Buehl and Fives (2009), Shulman (1987), Elbaz (1983), and Grossman (1990) is overviewed.

To inform their teaching, teachers access knowledge from a variety of formal and informal sources. Formal sources of teachers’ knowledge include knowledge acquired from pre-service teaching courses and in-service opportunities in a variety of formal and informal forms. Informal sources of teachers’ knowledge include knowledge acquired from observation, interactions, and reflection on their own professional and personal experiences and that of colleagues.

A recent American study conducted by Buehl and Fives (2009) with 53 pre-service and 57 practicing teachers with various levels of teaching experience examined sources of general teaching knowledge. Open-ended responses from a questionnaire were analysed. Teachers in this study viewed teaching knowledge as coming from six broad sources (a) _formal preparation_, (b) _formal bodies of information_, (c) _observational or vicarious learning_, (d) _interactions or collaboration_, (e) _enactive experiences_, and (f) _self-reflection_. Buehl and Fives (2009) categorise these knowledge sources as formal and informal sources of knowledge.

For Buehl and Fives (2009) formal sources of knowledge are
formal preparation; that is, pre-service training and professional development; and

formal bodies of information such as books, literature, and the internet.

These sources of knowledge are external to the individual. Shulman (1987) called these formal sources of teaching knowledge *formal educational scholarship*; that is, the materials and settings of the institutionalised educational process; and the research on human development, teaching, and learning.

The remaining four of Buehl and Fives’s (2009) sources of knowledge are informal sources that require teachers to engage in a process to acquire knowledge from the source. These are

- observational or vicarious learning; that is, observing others;
- interactions and collaboration with others resulting in co-construction of meaning through sharing, collaboration, discussion, and support; and
- enactive experiences which refer to the lived experiences of the teacher that gave them opportunities to construct meaning about the practice of teaching.

Shulman (1987) also wrote about the *wisdom of practice*; that is, the years of experience and repeated exposure to similar experiences over time. Shulman (1987) stated that much of this wisdom is lost when effective teachers leave the profession and a system for documenting effective teaching practices gleaned from experience is warranted.

The final category of knowledge for Buehl and Fives (2009) is neither formal nor informal but is intrinsic to the individual.


They suggest self-reflection involves four activities: (a) self-processes,
such as knowledge of self and self-reflection; (b) the ability to synthesise information and experiences e.g. putting together observations with prior experiences; (c) a willingness and capability to examine ones’ shortcomings as a teacher and address these in a meaningful way; and (d) innate sources such as intuition or natural ability, something within.

Buehl and Fives (2009) built the theory inductively, using a modified grounded theory methodology. Their study showed that teachers refer to multiple sources of teaching knowledge simultaneously and that there may be variation in how much weight or consideration the different sources of knowledge are given. They suggested the importance of a balance between sources of knowledge; that is, knowledge to be derived from a range of sources, as books or journal articles do not have all the answers, likewise not placing too much weight on experience.

Building on the work of Shulman (1987), Grossman (1990), and Elbaz (1983), Buehl and Fives (2009) also identified five broad types of knowledge necessary and unique to teaching (a) pedagogical knowledge, (b) knowledge of children, (c) content knowledge, (d) management and organisational knowledge, and (e) knowledge of self (and others).


- Knowledge of children refers to how students think and learn in general, as well as having knowledge of individual children’s interests, abilities, and needs. Grossman (1990) refers to this as knowledge of learners and learning.
Content knowledge refers to knowledge specific to a curriculum area, how to teach the content specific to that curriculum area, as well as the best way to teach children from all backgrounds. Shulman (1987) also calls this domain content knowledge, but he isolates pedagogical content knowledge to a separate domain. This is similar to what Elbaz (1983) calls subject matter.

Management and organisational knowledge refers to the range of classroom management responsibilities of teachers including behaviour, administrative, and time management, multitasking, organisation, and addressing the needs of a diverse classroom.

Self and other types of knowledge includes teachers understanding their personal strengths and weaknesses, how children learn in general, as well as individual learning styles. Elbaz’s (1983) framework also includes a self-knowledge domain. Grossman (1990) calls this knowledge of self.

The theoretical frameworks relating to teachers’ knowledge are important to this study as they provide a lens to view teachers’ work. In particular, these frameworks illuminate multiple sources and types of teachers’ knowledge. Teachers need to be aware of the various sources and types of knowledge to inform their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Theoretical frameworks relating to reflexive practice.

As noted earlier, teachers in this study are viewed as reflexive practitioners. The new theory that emerged from the data in this study, which will be detailed in chapter four, extends Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice. The new theory includes an added dimension to reflection, which is reflexive thinking. While reflection and reflexivity have similarities, there are important differences. Reflection
involves teachers thinking back on what they have done (Van Manen, 1991). Reflexivity involves teachers thinking back on what they have done too, but it goes further. It is also concerned with teachers understanding their experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how they can use that knowledge to inform future practice (Stingu, 2012).

Schön’s reflective practice.

Components of Schön’s (1995) theoretical framework of reflective practice provide a useful lens through which to view what teachers know, think, and do with children who are experiencing parental separation and divorce. Reflective practice has been widely embraced by the teaching profession (Hargreaves, 1996). For teachers, it involves thinking about what they have, or have not, said or done to guide actions to improve the effectiveness of their teaching and children’s learning (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). Reflecting on practice involves the construction of reality as seen by the individual teacher.

Reflective practice has been influenced by twentieth century educational philosopher John Dewey (1929). Dewey (1929) promoted practice that has been governed by thought. In the tradition of reflective teaching, teachers are viewed as practitioners who pose and solve puzzling problems of classroom practice. These types of problems may involve tacit knowledge like intuition, emotion, and passion, in addition to or instead of a series of explicit technical steps or techniques that are followed sequentially to arrive at a solution (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Reflective practice requires teachers to reflect on their own values and assumptions. This practical manner of solving problems can be considered synonymous with pragmatism, as pragmatism stresses practical ways to solve problems. Pragmatism,
along with symbolic interactionism, provides the theoretical base of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) grounded theory methodology.

Schön (1995) extended Dewey’s theory of reflective practice. He added other dimensions to reflection to include reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflecting-on-action occurs before the event when planning what action to take and after the event when considering what has occurred. Other theorists have developed analogous concepts. For example, Van Manen (1991) called this “recollective reflection” (p. 512), reflection that helps us to make sense of experiences and gain new or deeper insights into events. Archer (2007) makes reference to two reflexive tasks, one of which is “reliving” (p. 91) past events. Rolfe (1997) says reflective practitioners process their experiences through reflection-on-action into personal knowledge and then translate that knowledge into practice.

Schön (1995) describes reflection-in-action as times when an unexpected behaviour occurs that prompts immediate action. This is an important concept in this doctoral study, as the lives of young children who are experiencing the process of parental separation and divorce can be unsettled and children can react in unpredictable ways (Kelly, 2000). In these instances, teachers may be required to solve problems immediately; that is, reflecting-in-action. Van Manen (1991) called this “active or interaction reflection” (p. 512). He says this type of reflection allows individuals to come to terms with the situation or problem with which they are immediately confronted, allowing them to make decisions almost spontaneously. Van Manen (1991) notes that, when working with children, teachers often need to act in the moment, and there is not time to deliberate on what to do in a particular situation. He claims, however, the thinking process may still be apparent with the teacher making an apparent automatic decision. Van Manen (1991) says this type of
thinking is reliant on the “intuitive knowledge” (p. 534) that teachers have learned from professional and personal experiences. Teachers apply their intuitive knowledge in situations where they just seem to know the right thing to do. Intuition does not just happen. It is the unconscious workings of a prepared mind (Luk-Fong, 2008); that is, a teacher is intuitive only when they have a deep background understanding of the situation.

Another aspect of reflective practice is forward planning for action by considering experiences. Schön (1995) called this forward planning reflection-for-action. Similarly, Van Manen (1991) referred to this as “anticipatory reflection” (p. 512). Archer (2007) also referred to anticipatory forward thinking by “imagining...what would happen if...?” (p.91). Archer (2007) explained this is when teachers deliberate about possible alternatives to decide on courses of action and anticipate the outcomes. Wiley (2010) also wrote about anticipating the outcome of a particular action. He said we “try out each act in our imagination and visualise its effect...which...may help us make the decision and find the act we want” (p. 26).

Critics of Schön’s (1995) work claimed the focus to be on individual teachers reflecting internally to guide practice, without consideration of the external social context of the child that may be determining reactions (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), which may affect learning in the classroom. These critics suggest it would be more worthwhile to reflect internally on teaching practice as well as externally on both the context of the teacher and child (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Reflecting internally and externally may enable a more comprehensive view of teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.
Reflexive thinking builds onto Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice. Reflexive thinking addresses the limitation identified by critics of Schön’s (1995) work, whereby teachers reflect internally as well as consider the external social context to guide practice. Theorists such as Archer (2007) and Danielson (2008) have identified specific characteristics of reflexive thinking. They suggest it is context dependent and involves internal conversations that teachers use to construct personalised meanings that inform their decision-making.

Reflexive thinking is context dependent. Archer (2007) explains context dependency as considering what you can and cannot do in a particular context or instance. This is similar to what Danielson (2008) refer to as “situational thinking” (p. 133). Danielson describes situational thinking as involving both problem posing and problem solving within the confines of the immediate situation as they arise.

Archer (2007) says reflexivity involves “internal conversations” (p. 63) using language, emotions, sensations, or images. She says reflexivity involves activities such as reliving past events, planning for future eventualities, clarifying where one stands or what one understands, producing a running commentary on what is taking place, talking oneself through an activity, reaching decisions or coming to a conclusion about a particular problem (p. 2). Archer (2007) mentions specific mental activities she used in her interview study including mulling over a problem, planning, imagining what if, deciding or debating what to do or what is for the best, rehearsing what to do or say, reliving a previous event or episode, prioritising, imaginary conversations, budgeting, and clarifying the issue or problem (p. 91). Van Manen (1991) says teachers need to be “mindful” (p. 513) or have awareness and understanding of circumstances that are presented.
Reflexive thinkers construct personalised meanings. They integrate personal, practical, and contextual knowledge. According to Clandinin (1985), a teachers’ personal practical knowledge results from a blend of theoretical knowledge of learning, teaching, and curriculum, with knowledge gained through practice. Teachers reflect not only on theoretical knowledge but on personal and professional practical knowledge, which influences interactions in the classroom (Clandinin, 1985; Johnson, 1989).

Elbaz’s (1983) study based on interviews and observations of teachers to explore their knowledge, identified areas of teachers’ personal practical knowledge, one of which is knowledge of self that has resulted from a situation, personal or social experience and theoretical reflection. Elbaz (1983) identified five aspects of teachers’ practical knowledge—self, teaching, subject matter, curriculum development, and instruction. Elbaz’s (1983) study showed how teachers’ personal practical knowledge is shaped by the teachers’ purposes and values, and how this practical knowledge is used. An understanding of a teacher’s own values, beliefs, assumptions, experiences, and perceptions of the world directs teaching practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

In the context of this present study, when interacting with children experiencing parental separation or divorce, the teacher may reflect on their pedagogical knowledge. This knowledge may have been gained from prior interactions with the child, other children who have experienced parental separation or divorce, or more personal experiences with separation and divorce such as the teachers’ own separation or divorce, their parents’ separation or divorce, or that of a friend or other family member. The context-related knowledge (Hegarty, 2000) teachers have or gain of the young child and their separated or divorced parents may
impact on the teachers’ personal practical knowledge. A teachers’ pedagogical practice may be shaped because of their personal practical knowledge.

Theorists who support reflexive thinking also view teachers as engaging in decision-making cycles, whereby they seek knowledge and effective procedures or strategies to arrive at a solution. Wiley (2010) wrote about stages in purposive human action. He suggests “action is not a single burst of energy, but a build-up or construction that proceeds through a series of sequential dialogical stages” (2010, p. 23). Archer (2007) refers to a simple three step decision-making process that is undertaken when deciding on a course of action. These stages include (a) defining the concern, (b) developing a concrete course of action, and (c) establishing satisfying sustainable practices (p. 88). Rolfe (1997) suggests that reflexive practitioners construct personal informal theories, hypothesise, test the hypothesis by taking action, and reflect on the action to modify the theory (p. 4). Rolfe claims it is imperative the reflexive practitioner has an understanding of the unique needs of the individual in formulating her response to the issue.

There are numerous instructional cycles for teachers. These depict teachers cycling through similar phases where teachers observe and reflect; plan for improvement; act and observe; and evaluate, reflect, and shape (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2012, p. 140). Other researchers have proposed a five step process whereby teachers identify the problem, define the need, develop a plan, implement a plan, and evaluate the plan (Dempsey & Arthur-Kelly, 2007, p. 59).

2.7.3 Summary of theoretical frameworks and concepts informing the study.

This section has provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks and concepts informing the study. While traditional grounded theory studies do not use existing substantive theoretical frameworks to guide the study, existing frameworks
can be useful in interpreting research findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Existing substantive theoretical frameworks informing this present study include Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for understanding the various social influences on young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework is a useful framework for understanding the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children.

In this study, teachers have been viewed as reflexive practitioners. This resembles Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice; however, reflexive practice extends Schön’s (1995) theory and addresses the limitations of applying his theory to this present study. Teachers who apply the principles of reflective practice or reflexive practice engage in reflecting-on-action, reflecting-in-action, and reflecting-for-action. An important diversion from reflective practice is that reflexive thinking also takes into consideration the social context. In Schön’s (1995) theory of reflective practice teachers reflect internally within themselves, without consideration for the external context. These differences are important for this present study. In instances of teachers’ knowledge and thinking informing their practice, teachers may consider the family context, and their professional and personal life experiences when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

2.8 Chapter Summary

Together, the literature in this chapter makes a strong case for research exploring the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers who interact on a day-to-day basis with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Societal factors such as the amendment of divorce laws, high rates of marital
breakdown, and flexible attitudes toward marriage and de facto relationships have contributed to the diversity in composition of family types in Australia (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Poole, 2005). These changes have resulted in an increasing number of children residing in a variety of family types other than traditional nuclear or intact families. As a result, the ABS (2012) estimated over one million dependent children in Australia to be living in families experiencing separation or divorce. These changes in family composition and the number of children living in diverse family forms has created interest in the family from a legislative context to maintain the family unit, and support families experiencing separation and divorce, as families are viewed as the foundation of communities (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group Report, 2001). This has implications for government schools and teachers. Australian State education policy provisions for teachers working with children from separated or divorced families were examined to reveal inconsistencies across the various state and territory education policies.

Given the prevalence of parental separation and divorce, and the identified reactions young children exhibit, it is likely that teachers are being presented with a myriad of separation- or divorce-related issues from numerous children at any point in time. On a daily basis, teachers are interacting with and responding to young children who exhibit many often-unpredictable reactions resulting from their changing family circumstances. Therefore, every teacher needs to have an awareness of the effects of parental separation or divorce on children and how this may influence young children’s learning. Teachers also need to have an awareness of strategies to apply to support young children and promote learning during this period in their life.
The research literature was examined to identify what currently is known about teachers’ knowledge, thinking, and actions with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. This review yielded negligible research into teachers’ pedagogical practice that takes into account the often-unpredictable social, emotional, and academic needs of the young child. With informed knowledge and thinking, teachers can apply reflective pedagogical practices to promote learning in these young children (Miller et al., 1999). The present study examined the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers and what they know and think about young children from separated or divorced families and how this informs their practice when interacting with young children experiencing these family changes.

The research design for this study is detailed in chapter three. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview were analysed using Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) grounded theory methodology to explore what a sample of 21 state school teachers from regional Victoria, Australia know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.
Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1 Chapter Overview

Chapter three describes the research design adopted to address the primary research question: *What characterises the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce?*

This study examined the interface between the contexts of preschool and formal school education with children’s families, in particular, families experiencing parental separation and divorce. Specifically, this study examined what early childhood teachers know and think about children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and what early childhood teachers do with these young children.

Grounded theory methodology with particular reference to the version of grounded theory expounded by Corbin and Strauss (2008) that was adopted in this study is overviewed in section 3.2. The methods and procedures for conducting this grounded theory study are detailed in section 3.3. Data were derived from semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Data analysis consistent with Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) grounded theory approach is also specified in section 3.3. Criteria for evaluating the quality of the study is addressed in section 3.4. Finally, in section 3.5, ethical considerations of the study are discussed.

3.2 Grounded Theory Methodology

The first section of this chapter contains details of the grounded theory methodology expounded by Corbin and Strauss (2008) that was adopted for this study. Grounded theory methodology focuses on building theory (Patton, 2002) and is particularly beneficial in studies where little is known of the social phenomenon under investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As determined in the review of the
literature, there is limited research investigating early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Some theorists claim that a grounded theory approach is the most influential of the qualitative paradigms due to its rigorous nature (Patton, 2002). The use of a qualitative approach to research is justified in section 3.2.1. Grounded theory, within a constructivist paradigm, is described in section 3.2.2. An overview of the theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and pragmatism (Mead, 1956) underpinning this methodological approach is provided (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in section 3.2.3. A review of the origins and development of grounded theory is in section 3.2.4. To complete this section, the essential elements of grounded theory are outlined in section 3.2.5, along with the specific characteristics of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory used in this study.

3.2.1 A qualitative approach.

This research is a qualitative study. There is a range of reasons for choosing to conduct qualitative research in this inquiry. First, the methodology to be used in a study is dictated by the combination of research problem and research questions (Crotty, 1998). Second, qualitative studies enable researchers to connect with and learn more about the inner perceptions and experience of participants, as opposed to testing hypotheses and measuring variables in a quantitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each of these reasons for selecting to conduct a qualitative study is discussed in turn.

Research problems and questions should determine the methodology used in a research study (Berg, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). Qualitative studies aim to explore the lived experiences of people in real settings and understand how they make sense of everyday life (Hatch, 2002).
The research problem and research question in this instance called for a study based on qualitative analysis because the aim was to explore early childhood teachers’ knowledge and thinking, and how their knowledge and thinking influenced their pedagogical practice with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This study required a subjective, open-ended and interpretive approach that qualitative studies offer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) in order to capture the richness and detail of teachers’ pedagogical practices with children who have experienced parental separation and divorce. In contrast, a quantitative approach would rely on numerical data to answer a narrower research question as objectively as possible (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

A distinguishing feature of qualitative research methods is their ability to generate rich descriptions of meanings from participants, which assist in arriving at concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, and symbols to help understand the phenomenon (Berg, 2004). Such data are not easily gained through quantitative research methods which rely on standardised approaches and statistical procedures to measure phenomenon (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007). Thus, a qualitative research method was most appropriate in an educational problem of this nature, when the purpose of research was to gain deeper understandings of early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The following sub-section describes the constructivist paradigm used in this study.

3.2.2 Grounded theory and the constructivist paradigm.

Although educational researchers can choose from a broad selection of research paradigms to design their studies, the present study is set within a constructivist paradigm. Applying the constructivist paradigm in research assumes
three features (a) a relativist ontology, (b) a subjectivist epistemology, and (c) a naturalistic methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Adopting a relativist ontology entails acknowledging that there are multiple realities to phenomena. Adopting a constructivist epistemology means that the “knower and respondent” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 35) co-create understandings during the research process. A naturalistic methodology is an approach to research with participants in their natural worlds involving methods such as interviews and observations, as opposed to the analysis of artefacts, documents, or records.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) assume a relativist ontology or worldview. They view the world as “very complex,” wherein there are “no simple explanation for things” (p. 8). According to Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen (2007), situations and experiences do not hold meaning; it is the process of interpreting these events by individuals that provides meaning. Making meaning is not accidental: People reflect on prior experiences when interpreting events and situations, and giving meaning to them. People, therefore, actively engage in creating meaning in their world. In this research, by applying a constructivist epistemology, the researcher, participant teachers, and children in classrooms are viewed as constructing their own meanings in response to phenomena. It is assumed that the participating teachers’ internal mental processes, such as their understandings, beliefs, and values have been constructed by their own experiences, views, and perspectives (Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976). While no two teachers have exactly the same experiences, it is likely each teacher will have differing interpretations and perspectives on issues and phenomena. These differing interpretations and perspectives can result in a range of responses from early childhood teachers in their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. In this study, it is acknowledged that there are no
final answers or a set of processes to guide every situation (Bussis et al., 1976) teachers may encounter when interacting with children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Rather, this study aims to identify a range of pedagogical practices constituting early childhood teachers work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

In this study, it is also assumed that young children experiencing parental separation and divorce construct their own reality in response to phenomena. Research conducted by prominent UK researcher and sociologist, Smart (2006), supports this assumption. Her research narratives of siblings experiencing parental separation or divorce revealed an array of contrasting emotions and conclusions (Smart, 2006). This assumption that children construct their own reality to phenomena is important because different responses to similar phenomena create multiple realities, synonymous with the constructivist paradigm (Hatch, 2002).

From the perspective of constructivism, the researcher needs to position oneself in the study in order to interpret the understandings, shaping these interpretations by her own experiences and background. Considering one’s own experiences is consistent with the concept of theoretical “sensitivity” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32), a characteristic of grounded theory methodology where the researcher brings knowledge and skill to the study when generating categories. The following section describes the theoretical perspectives influencing Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory methodology; interactionism and pragmatism.

3.2.3 Theoretical perspectives informing the methodology.

The epistemology of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) methodology, and the epistemology of this study, are underpinned by the philosophies of interactionism
and pragmatism. These philosophies have relevance to this study in specific ways. Symbolic interactionism and pragmatism are complementary in that these perspectives view knowledge as constructed by people. The theoretical perspectives of interactionism and pragmatism informing this version of grounded theory are examined below.

Blumer (1969), an American sociologist, introduced the term, symbolic interactionism. He suggested that symbolic interactionism referred to interactions that occurred between people, how they interpreted the meanings of each others interactions, and how they responded according to their interpretations based on their perceived meaning. This notion helps to understand how teachers interpret the meanings of young children’s reactions and make interpretations to guide their interactions. Symbolic interactionism is important for this study because teaching is an interpretive process and these interpretations are likely to guide practice and interactions with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Dewey (1929) and Mead (1956) have influenced pragmatism. Both believed “knowledge is created through action and interaction” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 2) of self-reflective persons. In the pragmatist philosophy, action and interaction is typically prompted by a problematic situation, where one is required to engage in reflective inquiry and a process to resolve the problem. Furthermore, pragmatists believe in the accumulation of collective knowledge. Pragmatism is important to this study because this study aimed to access knowledge held by a sample of early childhood teachers and used by them to address an identified problem in the profession: that of their daily work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The following section describes the research process for this study
detailing the essential elements of grounded theory and the fundamental principles that guide the use of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version throughout.

### 3.2.4 Origins and developments of grounded theory.

Grounded theory is a specific methodology described and used for generating theory from data. It is a methodology that facilitates the study of processes or actions of people (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Steps and procedures for analysing data are emphasised in this methodology (Patton, 2002).

Grounded theory methodology has been evolving since its inception by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Each evolution of the methodology has attempted to build on or modernise the previous approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Figure 3.1 provides a visual organiser showing how grounded theory has evolved, how each variation relates to other versions, and what has influenced each evolution. Commentators refer to this as the “genealogy” of grounded theory (Morse et al., 2009, p. 17).

![Figure 3.1: Genealogy of grounded theory. Reproduced from “Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation,” by J.M. Morse, P. N. Stern, J. Corbin, B. Bowers, K. Charmaz, and A.E. Clarke, 2009, p. 17. Copyright 2009 by Left Coast Press.](image-url)
Figure 3.1 depicts the main grounded theory theorists from 1967 to the present, beginning with Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) formative work. Versions of grounded theory methodology differ in their epistemological perspectives, methodological strategies, assumptions about what constitutes theory, and conceptual directions (Charmaz, 2009).

Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) initial collaboration evolved from their common experience of the death of a close family member—a parent. Although they worked closely together on this project and in developing the original grounded theory methodology, the knowledge base of both men was vastly different. Strauss was influenced by qualitative perspectives arising from his interactionist and pragmatic writings, while Glaser was influenced more so by quantitative perspectives (Lin, 2008). These differing perspectives complemented each other in their pioneering grounded theory study, although Strauss and Glaser’s interests later diverged, as can be seen in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the three distinct designs that grounded theory methodology has taken: the systematic design, as influenced by Strauss (1987); the emerging design, as espoused by Glaser (Creswell, 2005; Morse et al., 2009); and later Charmaz’s (2000, 2006) constructivist design. Glaser remained closest to the original grounded theory method he developed with Strauss in the 1960s, while Strauss and his students continued to modify the method. The threads of Strauss and Glaser’s influence on grounded theory remains evident throughout all versions of grounded theory methodology. While each variation of the method is similar, there are also distinct differences.

Glaser is said to have remained true to the original version of grounded theory. Traditional grounded theorists advocate a rigorous step-by-step systematic method of
data collection and forming of a theory to explain a process or action, such as how pregnant women with a chronic illness manage their life (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), or to understand resiliency in pre-teen children in high-conflict families (Pomrenke, 2007). Glaser (1978) stressed the importance of allowing categories and theory to emerge from data, rather than using preset categories that may have been influenced by other studies or the research literature. He wrote of advancements in the methodology of grounded theory in his works entitled *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978). This advancement provided practical insights into grounded theory methodology and bridged gaps in the knowledge that was omitted from *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), particularly the development of theoretical sensitivity in data analysis (Glaser, 1978; Lin, 2008), whereby the researcher brings knowledge and skill to the study when generating categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978, 1992).

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), and Corbin and Strauss (2008) further developed the methodology. Based on concerns about validity and reliability in qualitative research, they introduced the concept of data analysis focussed on (a) consideration of causal conditions influencing the central phenomenon, action or intervening strategies; and (b) consequences or outcomes of these intervening strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Pomrenke, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This development brought broader structural conditions into the analysis.

Bringing broader structural conditions into the analysis was an important advancement for grounded theory methodology. Researchers could now consider all possible conditions and consequences that may influence a phenomena. For example, those arising from interactions in environments such as economic conditions, cultural...
values, political trends, and social movements, not relying only on those emerging directly from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lin, 2008).

In this study, the researcher is also a practitioner and draws on insights of causal conditions, intervening strategies and consequences, based on prior experiences, beliefs and values about the phenomenon when analysing research data. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990; 1998) and Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory is more rigorous and systematic than traditional grounded theory. It emphasises the use of data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and creating a logical visual representation of the theory that has been generated. Corbin and Strauss (2008) also introduced scope for the use of predetermined categories, advancing on Glaser’s traditional method of allowing categories to emerge solely from the data. In this study, the broad predetermined categories, teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action were integral to the research question.

Of less importance to this current study, but important in the overall genealogy of grounded theory, are the diversions made by Schatzman (1991), Bowers and Schatzman (2009), Clark (2003, 2005, 2008), and Stern (1995). Schatzman (1991) made the first major diversion from Straussian grounded theory in his work *Dimensional analysis*, in which he explored the notion that any phenomenon has more than a single meaning or representation. Schatzman (1991) posited that phenomena have complex dimensions or parts, attributes, interconnections, contexts, processes, and implications. This contribution was further developed by Bowers and Schatzman (2009), whereby concern was given for the perspective of how individuals come to define a situation (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009). Clark (2005), in *Situation analysis*, extended Straussian grounded theory by incorporating her work on the social world and the notions of situations to increase awareness of how

Charmaz (2006) developed constructivist grounded theory methodology by incorporating the ideas of both Glaser and Strauss. She advocates for a social constructivist perspective that emphasises multiple realities and complexities of the world. While constructivist grounded theory methodology may appear to be a good fit for this present study at first glance, the important difference between Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory and the grounded theory espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008) is that constructivist grounded theory aims for interpretive understanding rather than aiming for theoretical generalisations (Charmaz, 2011). Consequently, for Charmaz, any conclusions are suggestive, incomplete and inconclusive. Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) methodology, however, differs in that the outcome of their methodology is the generation of thick rich descriptions as well as theory. Thick rich descriptions that detail the processes of teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce is what this study aimed to achieve. Additionally, Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory is conveyed via narrative discussion only. Diagrams or conceptual maps are not used in the constructivist design, as they are viewed as detracting from the grounded theory (Creswell, 2005). Predetermined categories are also avoided in the constructivist design. These are key points of departure for this present study wherein broad predetermined categories of teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action were needed as they formed quintessential elements of the research question. Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory methodology, therefore, seemed to provide a better fit to meet the aims of this study.
Corbin extended the version of grounded theory she shared with Strauss before his death in 1996. Corbin’s aim was to “combine what was good about” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. ix) the prior method with the addition of a modernised dimension to bring the method into line with what she describes as contemporary thinking. This version of grounded theory promotes flexibility in data analysis techniques and the use of computer programs. While Corbin aimed to maintain Strauss’s view that generating theory was central to the contribution to the professional body of knowledge, Corbin no longer believed theory was the only way to contribute to scholarship. In addition to the generation of theory, Corbin believed there was great value in research that provided thick and rich descriptions, concept analysis, and the development of themes and concepts. This is what sets Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version apart from other versions of grounded theory, particularly the constructivist grounded theory methodology as espoused by Charmaz (2009).

Corbin (2008) based her advancement of grounded theory methodology on the idea that multiple interpretations may co-exist from the one set of data. This is the case also for teachers when interacting with young children, whereby individual teachers may have different interpretations of events. Each teacher is guided by their own professional characteristics that have been shaped by their professional and personal experiences. Differing interpretations may influence how teachers interact with children, resulting in a variety of strategies being applied among teachers to respond to similar behaviour or incidents.

Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) methodology consists of specific methods and systematic procedures. Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasised that the systematic set of “coding procedures” helps “provide some standardisation and rigor” to the analytic process (p. 13). Blaikie (1993) agrees, “grounded theories are not easily
refuted because they are intimately linked to the data” (p. 193) resulting from concurrent data collection and analysis. Corbin, however, encourages the use of the analytic steps of grounded theory as a guide only, encouraging flexibility to personalise the approach and allowing the researcher to creatively and intuitively interact with data, yet remaining true to the data. In this study, which adopted Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory, a number of analytic tools were used: making constant comparisons; theoretical sensitivity; drawing on personal experience; thinking about the various meanings of words; researcher memos and diagrams; and open, axial, and selective coding. These analytic tools are outlined in the next section.

3.2.5 Essential elements of grounded theory.

Grounded theory methodology has distinctive and systematic data collection and analytic features. It is a methodology that focuses on data collection and to analyse data to describe a process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory provides a rigorous and systematic approach to conducting research and it possesses specific characteristics. As detailed in section 3.2.4, there are numerous versions of grounded theory that have developed from the original as espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Each version of grounded theory has built on the previous one. Although there are elements that are unique to the various designs of grounded theory, most maintain there are certain essential elements that are synonymous with all grounded theory designs (Birks & Mills, 2011). These are:

- **Concurrent data collection and analysis** whereby data is collected and analysed simultaneously. The coded data informs subsequent data collection.

- **Initial coding** by which initial categories are generated from the data, fracturing the data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this as open coding.
- *Researcher memos* through which the researcher records written analytic thought throughout the research process.

- *Theoretical sampling* whereby data collection is focused by constant comparative analysis and strategic selection of participants to meet analytical needs.

- *Constant comparative analysis* whereby data are compared for similarities and differences throughout the research process in various ways such as incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories.

- *Theoretical sensitivity* refers to the researchers’ insight that she brings to the study.

- *Intermediate coding* follows on from initial coding whereby individual categories are connected and linked together, reconnecting the data conceptually. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this as *axial coding*.

- *Theoretical saturation* occurs when data analysis does not return any new codes. New data fits into existing categories, and these categories are explained sufficiently in terms of their properties (characteristics that define categories) and dimensions (variations within properties).

- *Identifying a core category* that summarises and explains the grounded theory as a whole.

- *Theoretical integration* is the process of linking categories around the central category. Corbin and Strauss (2008) called this *selective coding*.

- *Generating theory* explains a process associated with a phenomenon using the methods that have just been overviewed (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008).
To maintain the integrity of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) approach, it is important to adhere to the particular principles and procedures of their particular version of grounded theory. In addition to these essential elements of grounded theory described above, specific analytic techniques of Corbin and Strauss (2008) used in this study include:

- **Researcher diagrams**, a tool for assisting in the integration of categories.

- **Drawing on personal experience**, which involved reflecting on similar experiences to that of the participants to enhance sensitivity and stimulate thinking of properties and dimensions of concepts.

- **Various meanings of words** involved exploring the meanings of words or phrases that may have multiple meanings to ensure meanings are not taken-for-granted. This technique calls for brainstorming about various meanings to further analysis.

- **Storyline technique** is a technique to aid theoretical integration. Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest writing answers to questions such as, “What seems to be going on here?” “What is the main issue or problem that these people seem to be grappling with?” “What keeps striking me over and over when I read these interviews?” “What comes through in the data though it may not be said directly?” (p. 107).

- **Conditional/consequential matrix**. Corbin and Strauss maintain broader structural conditions must be brought into the analysis, even minutely. For example, broader structural conditions may be achieved by considering conditions that facilitate, interrupt, or prevent teachers’ work such as economic conditions, cultural values, political trends, social movements, and the links to action and the consequences that result (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; 2008). Corbin and Strauss
(2008) represent the conditional/consequential matrix as a set of concentric circles, as illustrated in Figure 3.2. Causal conditions move around the phenomenon. Consideration of these elements helps answer questions of who, what, where, when, and why, giving broader insight into the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 244). The arrows moving toward the centre circle represent the effect of the causal conditions that may influence the phenomenon, which is at the centre of the matrix. The arrows moving away from the centre circle represent the result of the intervening factors, the consequences of the intervening variables on the causal conditions.
Since these principles and general procedures distinguish this version of grounded theory from other versions, it is important that such a focus is evident throughout.

Figure 3.2. The conditional/consequential matrix. Reproduced from “Basics of Qualitative Research 3e,” by J. Corbin and A. Strauss, 2008, p. 94. Copyright 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.
3.3 Methods and Procedures

This section specifies the research procedure for this study. Participant selection and recruitment for the study are described in section 3.3.1. Data collection is overviewed in section 3.3.2. Data analysis and theory generation are detailed in section 3.3.3.

3.3.1 Participants.

A grounded theory study typically involves between 20 and 30 participants who have been purposefully selected. In this study, 21 participants completed semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected using purposeful theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative research seeks understandings of the world from the viewpoint of those who experience the phenomenon and explores how these understandings form the basis of practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002). Selection of participating teachers was based on the purpose and needs of the study in order to address the research question (Warren, 2002). The aim of this study was to explore the practices of early childhood teachers who interact on a daily basis with children who have experienced parental separation or divorce. It is the participating teachers’ intimate knowledge of their experiences that contributes to the richness of the data. Participants were early childhood teachers who had experience teaching a child whose parents were separated or divorced. As it is the classroom teacher who experiences this phenomenon directly in their daily contact with children and, indeed, who have more daily contact with children than any other professional, they were considered the most appropriate informants for a study of this kind.

Participants were drawn from government schools in regional areas in the state of Victoria, Australia, to provide a backdrop of public school policies, in-service
training, and information dissemination. Participants were from a number of state primary school sites to encompass multiple perspectives within the government school system. Recruiting participants from multiple school sites enabled important contextual information to emerge. Limiting data collection to only one school site may have limited the scope of data. For example, one particular school may have a particular approach, which may have influenced what teachers know and think, and how they work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Therefore, a broader range of school sites was sought to improve the credibility and transferability of research results. The exact number of participants was not decided ahead of time (Seidman, 2006). Rather, interviewing continued until “theoretical saturation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263); that is, until new information had ceased emerging from the interviews (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994).

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) granted permission to conduct the research in Victorian government schools according to DEECD protocols (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013). Principals of schools were first approached for their cooperation in recruiting early childhood teachers. Contact was made by telephone, and then principals were provided with a formal letter of invitation describing the study, and providing details about the interviews (e.g. time commitment required for teachers). This letter is included as Appendix A. This method of recruitment, however, yielded no prospective participants, despite successive follow up phone calls to principals. The second strategy applied was snowball sampling in which participants were asked to refer other prospective participants to the researcher (Warren, 2002; Weiss, 1994). An initial participant was recruited through a work
colleague and further participants were recruited through friends of the researcher’s family members. Through snowball sampling, participants referred colleagues, friends, and family members fitting the criteria for participation in the study. As a result, participants were drawn from a wide range of schools across Victoria, Australia. Participants comprised of twenty female teachers and one male teacher.

3.3.2 Data collection.

An essential element of any grounded theory study is concurrent data collection and analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011). Concurrent data collection and analysis guides the research and enables theoretical sampling. These elements are detailed in this section. The sequence for data collection and analysis in this study is illustrated in Figure 3.3. It is presented in a zigzag manner to illustrate the back and forth nature of concurrent data collection and analysis.

In grounded theory research there are many possible data collection tools such as interviews, observations, videos, documents, drawings, diaries or journals, memoirs, newspapers, biographies, historical documents, and autobiographies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data collection instruments must match the aims and purpose of the study. An aim of this research was to connect with teachers to learn more of their inner perceptions and experiences in order to explore early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This data could be gained through observation, videos, or document analysis, but these would not represent the teachers’ voices in the research, as was the aim of this study. In this study, data were collected using face to face semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Consistent with grounded theory approach, data were gathered and analysed concurrently.
In the following section, section 3.3.2, concurrent data collection and analysis, which leads to theoretical sampling is detailed, followed by specifics about the data collection methods used in this study—semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Data analysis will be further elaborated in section 3.3.3.
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce

Figure 3.3. The sequence for concurrent data collection and analysis.

Data collection

- Interview 1
- Coding – theoretical sampling; constant comparative analysis; theoretical sensitivity; drawing on personal experience; conditional/consequential matrix; researcher memos and diagrams

- Interview 2
- Coding – theoretical sampling; constant comparative analysis; theoretical sensitivity; drawing on personal experience; conditional/consequential matrix; researcher memos and diagrams

- Interview...21
- Coding – theoretical sampling; constant comparative analysis; theoretical sensitivity; drawing on personal experience; conditional/consequential matrix; researcher memos and diagrams

- Focus group interview
- Coding – theoretical sampling; constant comparative analysis; theoretical sensitivity; drawing on personal experience; conditional/consequential matrix; researcher memos and diagrams

Data analysis

- Generating initial codes - Open coding
- Refining categories - Axial coding
- Towards theoretical saturation

Theoretical integration (selective coding) by identifying a central category and using the storyline technique

Generation of substantive theory that explains the process of early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce
**Concurrent data collection and analysis.**

Concurrent data collection and analysis, and theoretical sampling are elements unique to grounded theory and are what sets it apart from other methodologies (Birks & Mills, 2011). That is, data collection and analysis occurs simultaneously for the purpose of informing and guiding further data collection and analysis. This process is illustrated in Figure 3.3. Theoretical sampling is an analytic technique that guides data collection. It involves collecting specific data to answer the research question and constantly reviewing the data during analysis to refine data collection and to ensure categories and their properties and dimensions have been thoroughly explored. Theoretical sampling ensures concepts are well developed and rich data is obtained to generate a comprehensive theory that is underpinned by thick rich descriptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

As each interview was conducted, it was analysed and coded before further interviews were conducted. Theoretical sampling focused the researcher on collecting data to answer the research question. As a result, the rate of data collection was controlled by the completion of data analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); that is, what was discovered in the previous interview informed the next interview.

In this study, as the first set of interviews were analysed, concepts emerged that required deeper exploration. The researcher made necessary adjustments to the interview protocol before conducting further interviews, refining questions to elicit clarifying and richer responses from participants. In this way, data collection and analysis went hand-in-hand (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process continued as each interview was conducted and analysed, until the researcher was satisfied theoretical saturation had occurred; that is, all concepts were well defined and explained in terms of their properties and dimensions (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss,
The initial and final interview protocols are included in Appendices B and C respectively.

**Semi-structured interview.**

Through interviewing participants, researchers can find out about the challenges people face and how their behaviours are influenced (Weiss, 1994). Interviews can reveal the inner perceptions and interpretations of events, and how these events affect participants in the study. Through interviewing participants in this study, the challenges teachers face when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce were investigated. Qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews aided the development of detailed descriptions from multiple perspectives and interpretations (Weiss, 1994).

The research literature categorises qualitative (Weiss, 1994) or “in-depth interviews” using differing terminology (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995; Weiss, 1994). Berg (2004) refers to *standardised, semi standardised* and *unstandardised* interviews. Corbin and Strauss (2008) use the terms *structured, semi-structured, and unstructured*. Interview types are classified according to their level of flexibility and structure (Berg, 2004). At one end of the continuum are standardised, formal, and structured interviews wherein the interviewer uses a set of predetermined questions to ask a precisely worded and ordered series of questions. At the other end of the continuum are unstandardised, informal, and unstructured interviews, which do not have a set of predetermined questions. Rather, interviewers formulate questions as they see appropriate, as the interview unfolds (Berg, 2004). Along the continuum sits semi-standardised and semi-structured interview types (Berg, 2004). Semi-standardised and semi-structured interviews have a set of predetermined questions that are used as a guide as in
standardised interviews; however, the interviewer is not bound by the set of questions. The interviewer is able to follow leads from the interviewee to probe for further information that may arise during the interview. As constructivist epistemology underpins this qualitative research, it calls for open-ended interviews around a specific topic (Warren, 2002). There is a focus on co-construction of meaning between interviewee and interviewer (Miller & Crabtree, 2004) as the researcher develops theoretical sensitivity to the phenomenon. In the semi-structured interviews with teachers in this study, the set of prepared questions was used to bring the interview back to the central questions, so the topic could be explored. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as they provided structure to explore the central research problem, as well as flexibility to uncover other relevant information. Semi-structured interviews allowed for theoretical sampling, whereby the researcher returned to conduct subsequent interviews that had been guided by the previous interview.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) stress that, while it is desirable for the researcher to enter the interview with an open mind, this does not mean an empty mind. Preparation prior to the interview by reading broadly around the topic is essential to elicit rich data.

The interviews were structured in the following manner (Miller & Crabtree, 2004):

- Grand tour question introduced the topic and began conversation.
- Probing questions provided back up and clarification to the grand tour question, and added depth to the interview data by asking the participant to be specific (Berg, 2004; Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002; Warren, 2002). Probing questions evolved
from the interview as it was taking place. Probing questions included (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Hatch, 2002):

- Tell me more.
- Could you explain that more?
- Can you give me an example?
- Tell me what you mean by____.
- What were you thinking at the time?

Guiding questions. In the event of a participant having little to say, guiding questions clarified what was requested and guided the conversation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002). These were prepared ahead of time.

At the outset of the interview, basic demographic data were gathered from participants. Participants were asked to tell about their teaching experience, how many years teaching experience they had, and where they had taught. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were not asked directly about their experiences with separation and divorce or their own family circumstances. Some participants, however, spontaneously offered some personal details throughout the interview, which provided insight into the nature of influences on their pedagogy. For example, a number of participating teachers had experienced their own separation and divorce while their own children were young. These personal experiences may bring insight to their work with children experiencing parental separation or divorce that other teachers do not have.

All interviews were digitally audio recorded, with permission from participants (Weiss, 1994), and later transcribed. In addition to recording the interview, the researcher took brief field notes during the interview. Field notes assisted to keep
track of the interview. Key words and phrases, and other relevant questions were noted to revisit with the participant later in the interview, rather than interrupting the respondent (Weiss, 1994). Note taking also provided a backup in case recording equipment malfunctioned (Hatch, 2002). Notes were recorded on the interview protocol for each participant.

A quiet venue for conducting the interview was negotiated with the participant. The researcher aimed to locate a mutually convenient venue that was free from outside noise to enable quality recordings, and minimal interruptions and distractions. Venues included the teachers’ classroom outside of school hours, school administration building, teachers’ homes, coffee shops, and restaurants.

During the interviews, the flow of conversation was encouraged to elicit in-depth information from the interviewee, allowing rich data to emerge from the interviews. The researcher used listening skills and was encouraging, uttering responses, body language and facial expressions to confirm that she understood what the participant was saying (Weiss, 1994), displaying sensitivity to the phenomenon. The relationship structure between interviewee and interviewer with the role of the researcher as listener empowered participants to tell their own story of their experiences (Mishler, 1986).

**Focus group.**

Individual interviewing continued until theoretical saturation; that is, until analysis of the interview transcripts did not reveal any new codes and each major category seemed well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Analysis in grounded theory, however, continues until formation of the final theory, therefore, theoretical saturation is not likely to be achieved until then (Birks & Mills, 2011). Corbin and Strauss (2008) say
that it is not unusual for further data to be needed to be gathered much later in the research process, after individual interviews have ceased. During coding and theory development, the researcher may gain new insights into the data. Indeed, during this study, the researcher gained new insights into the data after individual interviewing had finished. After the interviews had concluded and the new theory was being developed, it became evident that teachers in the interviews had not referred directly to their thinking processes that informed their practice.

At this point, a focus group was conducted to gather additional data about the link between teachers’ knowledge and their action, as well as confirm the preliminary findings. The focus group consisted of six participants. One participant had been an interview participant; the remaining five participants were new to the study. It was not demographically feasible for more interview participants to participate in the focus group, as interview participants had been drawn from multiple locations across regional Victoria. Focus group participants were recruited from a local school.

Following clarification from the focus group, the interview transcripts were revisited with a “fresh eye” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 150) to uncover evidence that had been overlooked or presented perhaps in a less obvious way. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this analytic strategy as considering the “various meanings of words” (p. 78). A participant may not have specified what they meant, therefore, the researcher must speculate about their intentions. The researcher brainstorms and considers all possibilities of meaning the participant may have intended. Data is revisited and searched for cues to decide which of these possible meanings makes sense within the rest of the data.
The researcher, as moderator for the focus group session, initiated conversation and allowed the discussion to flow naturally, intervening only when necessary to maintain focus for the discussion and to keep the session flowing and on schedule (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Probing questions were used to encourage discussion and to clarify and extend participants’ comments. The moderator minimised her comments so she did not influence the conversation (Stewart et al., 2007).

The focus group had a dual purpose—to gather additional data, as well as being confirmatory. As such, the interview guide for the focus group session came directly from the results of the study. Appendix D includes the full interview guide for the focus group presentation. Direct questions or topics to evoke discussion were presented to the focus group to provide direction for discussion (Stewart et al., 2007).

3.3.3 Data analysis.

Grounded theory provides a systematic approach to the analysis of large quantities of data. Analysis is focussed on identifying themes in the data and to develop a “substantive theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 56), which is a theory anchored to a particular context in which the data were collected. Theory construction is an open-ended, emergent process that relies on the ongoing interaction between the researcher and the data. The resulting theory is created by taking analysis to a high level of abstraction, which goes beyond rich description (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory, the substantive theory is also represented visually as a diagram, model, or picture.

Data were analysed manually using grounded theory methods identified in section 3.2.5—three stages of coding, memoing, and constant comparative analysis. Additional data analysis tools unique to Corbin and Strauss (2008) were used—
researcher diagrams, “drawing upon personal experiences” (p. 80), and the “conditional/consequential matrix” (pp. 90-95). In grounded theory research, data analysis begins immediately on being gathered and continues concurrently throughout the study (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Corbin and Strauss (2008) use three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective. Analytic tools of the constant comparative method, conditional/consequential matrix, and drawing upon personal experience informed analysis. During data analysis, the researcher referred to her theoretical sensitivity of the phenomenon by drawing upon personal experience and the research literature. Analytic reflections were recorded in researcher memos and diagrams. This section will explain the data analysis techniques that led to theoretical integration using Corbin and Strauss’s “storyline” (pp.106-107) technique. The result was the development of the substantive theory explaining early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

**Coding.**

Coding is “extracting concepts from raw data and developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 159). The various versions of grounded theory differ slightly with coding. Glaser (1978) identified two types of coding that lead to identification of the core variable—open and selective. Charmaz (2006) identified three stages of coding—initial, focused and axial. Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998), and Corbin and Strauss (2008) continued to develop the three stages of coding throughout their work together. The method of coding used in this study is that espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008)—open, axial, and selective. While coding is referred to as stages, there is actually no clear ending
of one stage and beginning of another. Rather, the stages naturally flow from one to the next.

The aim of this study was to determine early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Therefore, the interviews included questions under the broad categories of “know,” “think,” and “do.” Coding was also structured using these broad categories.

*Open coding.*

The initial stage of constant comparative analysis of data is open coding, whereby data is broken down into separate incidents and compared for similarities and differences in order to generate initial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As each interview was transcribed, it was analysed to identify important words and groups of words to arrive at substantive codes that described what was happening in the data. This process continued for each of the interviews. At this point, a list of initial concepts or codes was beginning to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

*Axial coding.*

In the second stage of coding, axial coding, the initial codes were scrutinised against data from subsequent interviews; that is, interview data were compared to each other. Data were sorted into codes, new data collected and compared for similarities and differences with the existing codes. In grounded theory generally, this process is called “constant comparative analysis,” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 94) whereby incidents in the data are compared with other incidents for similarities and differences that lead to the generation of initial categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As the name suggests, comparative analysis is constant throughout the research process. Codes were grouped together to form three major categories—teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action.
Constant comparative analysis also, simultaneously, informed theoretical sampling; that is, data that needed to be collected was informed by analysing the codes that had been generated and determined which ones need to be developed (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In Appendices E, F and G are diagrams in the form of tables that show the codes resulting from this study’s axial coding. These codes became the study’s major categories and their properties and dimensions. The data was also quantified in these tables by noting which participants referred to particular categories, properties and dimensions. This enabled judgements about the prevalence of different categories across all participants.

The conditional/consequential matrix is an analytic strategy useful for considering the possible conditions broader than the research data, and consequences of these that may influence the theory. In this study, the conditional/consequential matrix is useful to “capture some of the complexity” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 91) of the day-to-day lives of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Consideration was given to broader conditions that facilitate, interrupt, or prevent teachers’ work such as economic conditions, cultural values, political trends, and social movements, and the consequences of these on teachers’ work.

**Theoretical sensitivity.**

Unique characteristics to guide the coding of data in grounded theory include applying theoretical sensitivity and the use of the literature. Theoretical sensitivity is the insight of the researchers knowledge and experience that they bring to the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1992). The researcher puts oneself in the research context, having insight, being tuned in to, by being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings in data, by having both professional and personal background
knowledge, thus being able to respond both intellectually and emotionally, to assist in the formulation of concepts that are grounded in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1992). These standpoints aided the researcher in understanding meaning derived from the interview data (Warren, 2002). Such insight can help the researcher understand the significance of the data and see the connections between categories. In this study, as an early childhood teacher, the researcher has had experiences that were, in some ways, similar to that of the participants. These experiences were drawn on to give sensitivity to data during analysis. Practitioner research such as in this study is the focus of the professional doctorate program. Care was taken, however, to maintain the focus on the data and to keep sufficient distance to enable unbiased analysis of data.

Research literature can enhance theoretical sensitivity. The use of literature, however, is a contested topic among grounded theorists, as noted in chapter two. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were opposed to conducting a thorough preliminary literature review that was closely related to the phenomenon to be studied. They suggested that the researcher did not enter the field with a “tabula rasa” (p. 3) (blank slate). Rather they suggested the researcher has an informed mind, which arose from an awareness of the research literature. Glaser (1978) advocated a process of reading widely around the topic to achieve a sufficient level of theoretical sensitivity without contaminating and constraining analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011). Indeed, Corbin and Strauss (2008) agree that it is not necessary to have conducted a thorough review of the literature beforehand; however, they do believe concepts at the “property” (p. 46) and “dimension” (p. 45) level that have derived from the literature can provide a source for making comparisons with the data.
Recently, it has been claimed that grounded theorists have misunderstood the use of literature. Birks and Mills (2011) suggest the research literature has a place in all stages of a grounded theory study if used correctly. The research literature has been used during all phases of data collection and early analysis of this study, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Before commencement of data collection, a broad review of the surrounding literature was completed to enhance sensitivity. During data analysis, the research literature was used to make comparisons with the emerging data and to confirm findings. During coding, the research literature has been used as a source of theoretical codes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research literature was not consulted again until after the study had concluded so the developing theory was not constrained by the existing literature.

**Researcher memos and diagrams.**

Memoing is fundamental to grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Corbin and Strauss (2008) added researcher diagramming during analysis. Researcher memoing and diagramming was crucial to record researcher insights and thoughts and to provide a written record of reflections on the issues that unfolded during data collection and analysis. Researcher memos and diagrams served the purpose of recording the researchers’ analytic thoughts on the data as well as the beginning of the forming of concepts and relationships within the data. The writing of memos and drawing diagrams continued throughout the analytic period (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Routine memoing was established early in the study. As each interview concluded, it was transcribed as soon as practicable after the event and reflections of analytical thought were written (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Likewise, whenever the researcher was stimulated by an idea, this was recorded as a
memo. The memos contained some description of the event, as well as beginning the formation of concepts and relationships with the raw data, to arrive at the findings of the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Appendix H contains an example of an early memo. It contains a description of the interview with participant 14 under the initial broad categories. The beginnings of analytical thinking can be seen in this memo as underlined words and phrases. These were the beginnings of properties and dimensions of the categories and the themes that emerged from the data.

As the study grew, memos and diagrams were revised and developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Summary memos were written to summarise several memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and to record the researchers’ concept development and theory as it was developing. Appendix I is an example of a summary memo. This memo collates and summarises the data from all interview participants regarding what teachers know of the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. This memo contributed to major category one, teacher knowledge, as is detailed in section 4.3.3. Other memos recorded the researchers’ assumptions about what was happening in the data (Glaser, 1978, p. 57); reflections of books and papers; issues and problems with the research design; reflections of the research process; analytic decision making; and codes, categories, and the developing theory (Birks & Mills, 2011).

In addition to memos, diagrams assisted to show the summary or connections in the memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Diagrams can take the form of a table (e.g. Appendices E, F, and G), matrix or concept map (e.g. Appendix J) to provide a visual representation of the relationships of the emerging concepts. Diagrams are useful to systematically organise the mass of data, and simplify the data by reducing it to core meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Appendix J contains an example of an
early diagram. This diagram provides a summary of the major categories and the development of the properties and dimensions for participant 14, as identified in the memo in Appendix H. This diagram also illustrates the decision-making process of participant 14.

*Selective coding and theoretical integration.*

Following the gathering of data, interviews, writing memos, and drawing diagrams, it was time to synthesise. Selective coding is an advanced level of coding that leads to theoretical integration of the final grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) story line technique aided the construction and integration of the final theory. The final theory was also represented as a visual diagram (Figure 4.6).

From the data gathered, a thick rich descriptive story was written linking categories around the central category that described participants’ experiences of what they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Corbin and Strauss call this the “story line” technique to aid construction, integration, and presentation of the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 106). This was achieved in this study by asking, “What is the main issue or problem that these people seem to be grappling with?” “What keeps striking me over and over?” and “What comes through in the data though it may not be said directly?” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 107). A visual diagram of the theory generated supports the story line.

The descriptive story was then translated into an analytic story. An analytic story was achieved by incorporating the categories and themes that emerged during the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), to describe the process of teachers’ interactions with young children who are experiencing parental separation or divorce. The final
product was a grounded theory that provided a comprehensive explanation of a process in relation to the phenomenon. This phase of the study generated a substantive theory pertinent to how early childhood teachers work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. It was through the process of systematic analysis and constant comparison of data, that the codes were reduced and grouped together in a way that was indicative of the relationship that existed between them. This reducing and grouping of codes led to the formation of the theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under study—early childhood teachers’ pedagogical decision-making. The grounded theory is comprehensive because it includes variation rather than assuming there is a one-size-fits-all answer to a research question (Birks & Mills, 2011). The process that emerged appeared to apply to all participants in the study; that is they all seemed to be telling approximately the same theoretical story. There did not appear to be any negative cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) where the process did not fit a participant and their individual story or showed any gaps in logic.

3.4 Evaluating for Quality

The goal of this research was to develop a grounded theory that was meaningful to participants and the teaching profession, and made a valuable contribution to explaining what early childhood teachers know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that quality of research is demonstrated through the “fit” (p. 305); “applicability” (p. 305); and the capacity for generalisation, and “contextualisation of concepts” (p. 306) for developing common understandings for the teaching profession. Fit refers to the resonance or fit of the findings with the group of people whom which the study was intended. Applicability refers to the usefulness of the
Findings to building the knowledge base of the profession (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Fit and applicability were achieved in this study in a number of ways:

- A pilot study was conducted prior to the commencement of formal data gathering. The pilot study consisted of two teachers. The formulation of interview questions, researcher interview technique, data analysis, memo writing, and diagramming were trialled during the pilot study. Modifications were made to the interview protocol following the pilot study (Weiss, 1994). As the study progressed, modifications continued to be made to ensure sufficient data was gathered to address the research question (Weiss, 1994).

- Data was presented to participants for member checking. Participants reviewed their own interview transcript. They were asked to respond whether the transcript was accurate, and if there were anything they would like to add or delete. All participants responded that it was an accurate transcription of the interview. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that member checking is the most crucial strategy for validating data.

- The preliminary findings of the study were presented to a focus group for peer review. The focus group involved six teachers to gather their opinion and confirm the results of the study (Stewart et al., 2007), whether the knowledge gained from the study, in their view, was accurate and practicable in identifying teachers’ pedagogical practices with children experiencing parental separation or divorce. As one purpose of the focus group was to confirm study data, the majority of the focus group session was dedicated to what Krueger and Casey (2009) term ending questions. Ending questions brought closure to the
topic, reflecting back and summarising data gained from the study. At this point, focus group participants were presented with small sections of a summary of the results of the study at a time. Focus group participants were asked, “What is most important?” “What is least important?” and “What is missing?” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 41). Focus group participants unanimously agreed with the results of the study.

- The constant comparative technique was applied to the data. Interviews were compared with other interviews, focus group data, and concepts from the research literature. Making constant comparisons assisted the researcher to guard against bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Quality of the study was evaluated in many ways—the rigorous systematic process of data collection and analysis of grounded theory methodology, a pilot study, member checking, peer review, and constant comparative technique. Together, these strategies confirmed the study’s results fit, or resonance, with the experience of participants, as well as broader applicability to the teaching profession, (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), thus producing a rigorous substantive grounded theory that explained what early childhood teachers know, think, and do with young children experience parental separation and divorce.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics committees are in place to safeguard the confidentiality, privacy, and wellbeing of research participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number 000000668) and the Department of Education and
Early Childhood Development in Victoria (File Number 2010_000749). These approvals are included as Appendices K and L respectively.

This study was conducted within the principles of ethical conduct set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2013). The prevention of harm to individuals is dominant in these codes, as in most codes of ethical practice (Berg, 2004) so too is respect for individuals, research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence, and participants’ consent (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005; *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, 2013; Piper & Simons, 2005).

Attention was given to treating participants with respect throughout the research process. Participants and their schools were fully informed of the purpose and nature of the research (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Long, 2007a, 2007b; Piper & Simons, 2005; Williamson, 2007). Participants received a detailed participant information sheet. Prior to commencement of the study, participants completed a consent form (Piper & Simons, 2005) confirming they fully understood the purpose of the study and their role. If participants wished, they could withdraw at any time without comment (Creswell, 2005; Williamson, 2007). Participation in the study was voluntary (Long, 2007b). Participants were not over-researched by asking unreasonable demands of their time (Williamson, 2007). Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. Participants’ personal details remained confidential. Data gathered from participants remained anonymous and was only shared with persons in relation to the study who had a professional responsibility to maintain confidentiality and anonymity (Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2005; Williamson, 2007). Pseudonyms were used in all written and oral presentations (Long, 2007a). Care was taken with the storage of data to maintain
confidentiality (Berg, 2004; Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2005; Long, 2007a, 2007b). When disseminating data, non-discriminate language has been and will continue to be used (Creswell, 2007). Participants received interview transcripts by email for their approval, to which they could make changes.

While children were not direct participants in this research, they were the subjects of the interviews. As the teachers’, children’s details remained confidential by the removal of identifying information. Care has been taken with the storage of data to maintain the protection of identities of children and school sites (Long, 2007a, 2007b). The protection of children has been paramount in this study.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research design for the study. Grounded theory was selected for this study for two main reasons. First, given the limited existing research on teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, it was considered that there were no suitable theoretical frameworks to guide data collection and analysis. Therefore, the main aim of the study was to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon. Second, in order to build theory about teachers and young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, it was essential to find a qualitative approach that provided strategies for analysing process, structure, and relationships among concepts to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. Grounded theory goes beyond description of themes to develop a theoretical explanation of the complex studied phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Choosing between the various grounded theory designs required several considerations. This study adopted Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory. As described in section 3.2.4, there are obvious differences between each of
the various versions of grounded theory. There were three distinct characteristics of Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory that were not offered by other versions. First, Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version emphasised flexibility in procedures, such as using the literature at various stages of the research process, a strategy to which Glaser (1992) was opposed. In this study, the literature aided the development of broad predetermined categories in analysis, which is contrary to the Glasserian approach. Second, in Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory, the researcher has theoretical sensitivity and is positioned in the research. Positioning the researcher in the research is unique to this version of grounded theory and supports practitioner research, as is the goal of the professional doctorate program. Third, Corbin and Strauss (2008) advocate the development of a logic paradigm or a visual picture of the theory generated. Visual displays are not used in either the Glasserian approach or Charmaz’s approach to grounded theory. Charmaz suggests visual diagrams detract from the theory. The views, beliefs, and feeling of individuals are the focus of Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory approach, rather than gathering facts and describing acts. The aim of this study was to build a theory that described teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce therefore, Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory provided a good fit for this study. The research literature was used in various ways throughout this study, and visual diagrams were used to explain concepts and to support the final theory.

Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory is underpinned by the complementary philosophies of interactionism and pragmatism. Essential grounded theory elements synonymous with all versions of grounded theory were applied—concurrent data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, coding, constant
comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, theoretical saturation, memos, and theoretical integration. Where Corbin and Strauss modified these elements, these were adhered to, specifically Corbin and Strauss’ three types of coding—open, axial and selective (theoretical integration); and comparison with the existing research literature. In addition, analysis techniques unique to Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) version of grounded theory were applied—researcher diagrams, drawing on personal experience, various meanings of words, and the conditional/consequential matrix.

The rigorous nature of grounded theory methodology provided for quality in research. Additionally, a pilot study, member checking, and peer review strengthened the quality of the study. The result was the construction of a substantive theory that described what a sample of purposefully selected 21 early childhood teachers from Victoria, Australia know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine early childhood teachers’ knowledge and thinking, and how their knowledge and thinking influenced their pedagogical practice with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The research was conducted with the aim of developing better understandings of this phenomenon, in order to provide insights for early childhood educators finding themselves in similar situations. The key findings obtained from 21 semi-structured interviews and one focus group interview with early childhood teachers from government primary schools in regional Victoria, Australia are detailed in this chapter. Accounts of the everyday worlds of the participants in relation to their pedagogical decision-making when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce are presented in chapter four.

In keeping with the traditions of grounded theory, the research question was deliberately broad and open-ended to uncover the many and varied responses of participants. The semi-structured interviews and focus group interview were conducted to address the broad research question: *What characterises the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce?* As defined previously in chapter one, *pedagogy* is a broad term that includes indirect teaching activities such as pastoral care and forming and maintaining productive relationships as well as direct teaching activities such as curriculum content. The term *practice* denotes action or strategy. Therefore, in this study, the term *pedagogical practice* has been used to refer to the range of actions or strategies that early childhood teachers use to support the
wellbeing and learning of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) caution that in grounded theory studies where theory building is the goal, then findings should not be presented as a simple listing of themes. They suggest this obscures the unifying explanatory scheme generated in such studies. For clarity, integrative diagrams are used in this chapter to depict the study’s central category in relation to the study’s major categories. Diagrams are also used to represent the details of each of the major categories.

4.2 Introduction to the Study’s Central Category and Three Major Categories

In this grounded theory study, data analysis revealed a central category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that captured the main theme of the data and integrated the study’s three major categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)—teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action. The relationships between the three major categories describing the central category are represented in Figure 4.1. The diagram shows the central category, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogic decision-making process, as representing the study’s main theme. Around the central category are the three major categories—teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action.
The central category represents a process, highlighting the interconnectedness of findings and my interpretation of the research. It represents how early childhood teachers in this study made pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This process consists of five phases encompassing the study’s three major categories teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action, as shown in Figure 4.2.
The central category is not static. It is a dynamic interactive process where teachers engage in:

1. *Constructing their knowledge*.
2. *Applying their knowledge* to analyse the present situation.
3. *Applying decision-making schema*.
4. *Taking action*.
5. *Monitoring and evaluating* results of their action.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the study’s three major categories include and incorporate these five phases. The relationships between the phases of the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process and the major categories are as follows:

*Figure 4.2.* The central category’s five phases and the study’s three major categories. The study’s major categories have been colour coded—red represents major category one, teacher knowledge; yellow represents major category two, teacher thinking; and green represents major category three, teacher action.
1. Constructing their knowledge relates directly to major category one teacher knowledge.

2. Applying their knowledge relates to major category two teacher thinking.

3. Applying decision-making schema relates to major category two teacher thinking.

4. Taking action relates to major category three teacher action.

5. Monitoring action and evaluating relates to major category two teacher thinking.

The key findings are now presented for each of the study’s three major categories. In light of these findings, the central category will be elaborated further. The key findings in each of the major categories are displayed in Table 4.1. Corbin and Strauss (2008) use the term *properties* (p. 46) to define the specific components or features of a major category or concept.
### Table 4.1

*The Study’s Major Categories and Key Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major category one teacher knowledge</th>
<th>Key finding one: Participant teachers gained knowledge regarding young children experiencing parental separation or divorce from various informal sources.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property one: Source of teachers’ knowledge</td>
<td>Key finding two: Participant teachers expressed substantial but idiosyncratic knowledge of parental stress factors regarding parental separation or divorce and the impact on young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property two: Teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon</td>
<td>Key finding three: Participant teachers were frequently not formally informed of young children’s family circumstance, of the phenomenon, or how to respond to children experiencing parental separation or divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property three: Not formally informed</td>
<td>✠ Major category two, teacher thinking, has four properties: developing understandings, applying experiences, anticipating outcomes, and applying intuition. The key finding for this major category encapsulates these four properties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major category two teacher thinking</th>
<th>Key finding four: Pedagogical decisions were informed by participant teachers’ reflexive thinking that was related to the unique characteristics of specific children and their family circumstances.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Major category three teacher action</th>
<th>Key finding five: Participant teachers engaged in a range of pedagogical practices to construct emotional, academic and behavioural support to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property one: Teachers constructing support</td>
<td>Key finding six: Participant teachers formed partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members and organisations to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property two: Teachers forming partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Major Category One: Teacher Knowledge

4.3.1 Section overview.

Major category one teacher knowledge is a large category, the properties of which are depicted in Figure 4.3. Corbin and Strauss (2008) use the term properties to define the specific components or features of a major category or concept. The three properties comprising major category one, and the breakdown and categorisation of the many dimensions that form each property are shown in Figure 4.3. Together, major category one reveals three key findings. The first key finding relates to teachers’ informal sources of knowledge. The second key finding relates to teachers’ substantial but idiosyncratic knowledge of the phenomenon. The third key finding relates to teachers not being formally informed of the family context or the phenomenon. This section has been organised according to these three key findings.
Figure 4.3. Major category one: Teacher knowledge and its properties and dimensions. Properties define the components of the category. Dimensions describe the variations of a property (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
4.3.2 Sources of teachers’ knowledge.

Sources of teachers’ knowledge refer to the individuals and contexts from which teachers have gained knowledge about young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Participants disclosed four sources of teachers’ knowledge. Three of these sources of knowledge provided early childhood teachers with knowledge of the family context (a) young children as the primary source of knowledge, (b) family as a source of knowledge, and (c) school and community based sources of knowledge. The fourth source of teachers’ knowledge, enactive experiences, represents teachers’ knowledge drawn from their professional and personal life experiences of the phenomenon, in particular parental stress factors and the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. The term, enactive experiences has been drawn from the work of Buehl and Fives (2009) to describe professional and personal life experiences.

Sources of knowledge of the family context.

The overwhelming majority of participants in this study (19 out of 21, 90 percent) identified young children as their primary source of knowledge for developing understandings about children’s family context regarding parental separation or divorce. One participant stated unequivocally, “kids are usually the first point of information” (IP: 11). Teachers gained this knowledge by observing changes in children and engaging in conversations with children.

The majority of participants (16 out of 21, 76 percent) acquired knowledge of the family context by observing changes in children. Teachers indicated that knowledge gained from young children was not always directly sourced, and that teachers used children’s verbal and physical cues to deduce knowledge of the family context, the family circumstances surrounding parental separation and divorce, and
young children’s unique experience with their parents’ separation or divorce. This participant explained that it was often through observing and interpreting “their verbal cues or their physical cues [then] you find out that there’s something changed at home” (IP: 19). Focus group participants confirmed they were first alerted to the family context through the responses of young children, highlighting that children’s responses could be in the form of adverse reactions. A focus group participant explained, “Usually there's some indicator coming from the child and it's usually an adverse type reaction” (FGP: 3).

In particular, participant teachers observed changes in young children’s behaviour, work habits, and organisation that, based on teachers’ prior experiences, indicated to teachers that young children were experiencing their parents’ separation and divorce. As well, this provided the teacher with knowledge of young children’s unique experience with parental separation and divorce. The following excerpts also suggested that early childhood teachers interpreted other cues from young children to gain knowledge of family context. There is a time lag before teachers take action while teachers make sense of children’s cues.

You often notice some child is not behaving perhaps as normal. They are not perhaps doing the right thing or following the right routines and all that. Often you will find out maybe a fortnight later, three weeks, sometimes even a lot later, that the parents are having difficulties and there is a separation brewing or it has happened and you didn’t know (IP: 6).

For other teachers, however, children’s cues were more readily distinguished and were signalled by a change in behaviour. One participant commented, “You just notice straight away. Especially the kids that maybe don’t always act out; they might
start acting out” (IP: 11). Another participant commented, “You could see a definite change in their...emotional wellbeing” (IP: 18).

There was a sense that children were not themselves, and that atypical behaviour could indicate that a particular child was experiencing stress. In the following excerpt, this participant described her observations:

Often the first signs are that there is a child that doesn’t seem to be in normal routine and... Not having things at school with them, like their reading folder. Perhaps not completing work, talking too much (IP: 6).

Some participants (7 out of 21, 33 percent) spoke about acquiring knowledge of children’s family contexts through explicit and incidental conversations with children. In explicit conversations, there was deliberate exchange of knowledge between teacher and child. In incidental conversations, the teacher was not a participant in the dialogue; rather, the teacher may have overheard a conversation the child has had with someone else or the class.

Interview participants also engaged in explicit conversations with young children that informed their knowledge of the family circumstances surrounding parental separation and divorce. These interactions relied heavily on children communicating, in various forms, the change in their family circumstance. One participant spoke about an instance when the child told her “about the fact that either mum or dad isn’t there” (IP: 18). Another participant spoke of children who “will come to school and they will tell you” (IP: 20) about changes at home. She went on to provide examples of what children had actually said to her such as, “my dad is going away, or my mum is going away, or Dad doesn’t live with us anymore” (IP: 20).
Interview participants also engaged in incidental conversations with young children who told them about their parents’ separation or divorce, provided details of the family circumstance surrounding parental separation and divorce, and disclosed young children’s experiences with parental separation and divorce. Here, a teacher recounts a very public sharing of information by a child, albeit incidental:

She got up and told it for news. She started off with something else...and went on to say that there were obviously some arguments happening at home and that dad might not be staying (IP: 6).

Interview participants referred to incidental conversations with young children or conversations young children had with other children that the teacher overheard. These incidental conversations led the teacher to realise that those young children’s parents were separated or divorced. These teachers also gained knowledge of the family circumstances, particularly around the issue of moving between households over time. For example, teachers overheard children say, “I’m going to dad’s” (IP: 1) and “I’m going to dad’s for the weekend” (IP: 11).

The majority of teachers (20 out of 21, 95 percent) spoke of the family as a source of knowledge and they gained knowledge of family context through interactions with young children’s parents at one time or another. Interactions with parents may be formal or informal. A formal interaction is an interaction that was scheduled or requested by the teacher or parent. Formal interactions included parent-teacher interviews, enrolment interviews, and preparatory assessment days. Informal interactions are interactions that may not been formally scheduled or requested by the teacher or parent. They are interactions that have occurred incidentally between teacher and parents such as before or after school, or by telephone.
Out of the 21 interview participants, 14 participants (67 percent) said that parents sometimes approached them directly, but it was not common practice for all parents experiencing parental separation or divorce. One interview participant commented, “The parents often don't tell us” (IP: 19). Another participant explained:

There are the times some parents will come up...and tell you that, there might be some problems at home. We are going through a difficult time at this stage or something like that and they will let you know... [However,] that tends not to happen that often. I think probably more often than not, in my experience, the ones I've experienced, you find out by some other way. (IP: 6)

Teachers or parents could request parent-teacher interviews. Some participants (9 out of 21, 18 percent) initiated contact with parents when they noticed changes in young children’s behaviour or engaged in conversations with young children. These observations and conversations provided hints about the family context. In these instances, teachers may invite parents to attend a formal interview. One participant described how the observed changes in young children’s behaviour prompted her to make contact with the family using an open-ended strategy. She explained that she had “contact[ed] the parent and [said] I’ve just noticed the change of behaviour and is there anything I should know?” (IP: 17).

When children were enrolled in the school for the first time, the enrolment interview with children’s parents provided teachers with some knowledge of the family context. Enrolment interviews may occur when young children begin school or when young children transfer from other schools. In the following excerpt, a participant suggests, however, that it is not always the case for parents to inform the school or teachers of the family context when commencing at school. She said, “If a child transfers in, they perhaps come and tell you” (IP: 2) about the family context.
Preparatory (Prep) assessment days are scheduled for young children beginning their first year of formal schooling in Victoria. During Prep assessment days, parents accompany their children to school for initial academic assessments. During these sessions, teachers reported acquiring knowledge of the family context about parental separation and divorce, and sometimes they deliberately set time aside to ask directly. For example, if teachers noticed children’s parents had different family names:

I always allocate probably 15 to 20 minutes...to actually just talk to the parents...you can often work out from the enrolment stuff if there’s different names—you try to find out just by asking (IP: 3).

In the excerpt above, this participant suggested that she found out about the family context by asking parents specific questions; however, she acknowledged that parents might not disclose these details without prompting.

Similarly, this participant indicated that she probed parents for details of the family context. She said some parents took the initiative to inform the teacher of their family context, yet others chose not to tell.

I catch up with the parents after [the academic assessment]...Sometimes, I’ll say... is there anything you think I need to know about your child or about your home life that may impact on his learning at school?...Some parents will then open up and tell you the situation (IP: 12).

Informal interactions occurred at irregular intervals and occurred somewhat serendipitously. These were not formal interactions that were requested by the teacher or parent but they occurred during their everyday routines such as at morning drop off and afternoon pick up, or by phone. Participant teachers reported having
conversations with parents regarding access visits. For example, this teacher explained that parents “usually...will come in on the Friday and say, ‘Jack’s going to his father’s on the weekend’” (IP: 12).

Some teachers (9 out of 21, 18 percent) initiated contact with young children’s parents following an episode of inappropriate behaviour, after observing change in the young child’s behaviour or performance, or following conversations with young children. During these interactions with parents, a teacher may become informed of parental separation or divorce and the family circumstances. This participant explained, “If I’ve noticed a change in behaviour, I’m always quick to discuss it with the...parents” (IP: 4). Another participant spoke of a time when she initiated contact with the parent by telephone when a child was distressed. She recalled, “I rang her to see if she could come and get him if we needed that. She said, ‘Oh look, I did wonder’” (IP: 3) how he was coping with the parental separation.

Another important source of knowledge for teachers was school and community based. Teachers gained knowledge of the family context through sources within the school (17 out of 21, 81 percent) and wider community (7 out of 21, 33 percent). School and community sources included formal and informal sources. Formal sources included official records and procedures such as school enrolment forms, personal details pro-formas, verbal handover from the previous teacher, and court orders. Informal sources included interactions with colleagues, other parents, or members of the wider community.

School enrolment forms sometimes provided teachers with knowledge of the family context. School enrolment forms may contain details of custody arrangements involving young children, which provided teachers with knowledge of the family context. This participant explained that at her school “it’s written on their enrolment
form like if there are any access or visit issues” (IP: 9). Teachers, however, do not always have access to these.

Participants also referred to personal details pro-formas. There were two types of personal details pro-forma described—a teacher pro-forma and a parent pro-forma. On teacher pro-formas, teachers recorded relevant information about their knowledge of parental separation or divorce to inform children’s subsequent teacher. One participant referred to it as “a little profile...that was passed on” (IP: 2). Another participant described contents on the teacher pro-forma, “there’s the academic achievements and then there’s a part where we’ve got to put in this sort of thing” (IP: 10) regarding children’s family context. Completing teacher pro-forma seemed to be a routine practice in many schools.

Administration staff provided parents with a pro-forma at the beginning of each school year. These pro-forma prompted parents to update personal information including address details. While the parent pro-forma was intended purely for administrative purposes, early childhood teachers have noted details parents have provided on these pro-forma, using it as a source of knowledge of the family context regarding parental separation or divorce. This participant explained the process:

Usually at the beginning of the year, they [parents] fill out an information sheet with all the family details and information like that. I normally go through that, to get a bit of an idea what the background is (IP: 12).

This participant also indicated, however, that at her school it was not routine practice for this pro-forma to be made available to teachers, as they were intended to be managed through the school administration system. This teacher suggested that she collected the pro-forma from children when they returned them to school and she
took the opportunity to read over them before forwarding them to administration staff, thus using the forms as an unofficial source of knowledge.

Participant teachers spoke about participating in a verbal professional handover during which details of children were profiled with their previous teacher. Specific details included academic information, as well as other information teachers considered relevant but not appropriate to document officially such as details of the family context about parental separation or divorce. This participant explained this information as “sensitive” (IP: 11). She explained, “At the start of the year, when you get your kids, there’s usually...a handover between staff, passing on maybe sensitive information to the next teacher about the child” (IP: 11).

Participant teachers mentioned gaining knowledge of family context regarding parental separation or divorce through legal documents provided to the school such as court orders and welfare cases. When a child transferred into a school, these details were forwarded onto the school by the previous school. One participant explained, “Sometimes [with] divorce and separation...there’s a welfare case that follows that child particularly if that child comes from another school” (IP: 17). She suggested that details were forwarded on to the current classroom teacher and passed on from teacher to teacher in subsequent years in children’s files or verbally. Another participant explained that she had “worked in a particular school where there have been intervention orders against dad. So when you get the kids at the start of the year, that’s passed on to you” (IP: 11).

Apart from these formal sources, participant teachers gained knowledge of family contexts through informal school and community based sources via their communications with colleagues, other parents, and members of the community. Colleagues included other teachers, the principal, and administration staff. Teachers
referred to communicating with their colleagues about family contexts. They passed on information they had heard about parental separation or divorce. Information was frequently attained incidentally. For example, a teacher of an older sibling passed information on to the teacher of the younger sibling. A participant told that colleagues were generally helpful in this regard, explaining, “The teachers will tell you if they’ve heard, maybe another sibling will say” (IP: 7). At times, teachers became alerted to a situation by observing characteristics of young children that were out of the norm for that child or listening to conversations of young children. In these instances, teachers have sought out young children’s previous teacher to source knowledge about the child’s usual responses and personal issues such as the family context regarding parental separation or divorce. One participant explained that she “spoke to one of his teachers that he’d had the year before” (IP: 11). Another participant, however, indicated that knowledge of family context from the previous teacher was seldom forthcoming, until the teacher made an enquiry from the previous teacher. While the teacher is busy making sense of their observations and conversations with young children, there is a time delay before the teacher is able to take action. One participant explained this confusing and somewhat inefficient scenario. This teacher said she “might go to the teacher that’s had them before and say, you know, what’s going on here? What’s the story?...however, this often isn’t until a problem has presented” (IP: 10).

Participant teachers spoke of sourcing knowledge from the school principal. Principals sometimes passed on relevant information to the classroom teacher. Some participants suggested, however, that principals were not at liberty to pass on this kind of information to teachers without the permission of parents. They reported that principals viewed parents as approaching them in confidence, and the sensitive
information they disclosed would not be discussed with colleagues. The following excerpts were typical of such reports:

Your principal would try to fill you in and give you as much background information as they could (IP: 18).

A principal might come – the parent’s gone to the principal and said, look, this is what’s happening in our household and with their permission they told me (IP: 14).

Participant teachers also found out inadvertently about the family context concerning parental separation or divorce from administration staff. For example, administration staff may have requested two copies of a child’s report card from the classroom teacher to be forwarded onto both parents. Teachers interpreted this as a signal that the child’s parents were separated or divorced. This participant explained she was not routinely informed about family contexts, but trusted “the office” would know. She explained, “When report time comes, if both parents want a copy, we need to know that. So, the office will know whether we need to send two copies out” (IP: 12).

Participant teachers spoke of how they “became aware of it [the family context] because of talk in the community” (IP: 5). In the following excerpt, a teacher made reference to being a member of the school and wider community for an extended period of time. As a result, she said she was privy to information of family context regarding parental separation or divorce that was circulated among other parents and community members “on the grapevine” (IP: 5). She explained, “Sometimes you hear it on the grapevine because you know lots of the parents at the school and you’ve known them over a long time. So sometimes another parent will say something” (IP: 6). Another participant also spoke of acquiring information
through other parents. She explained, “In the community I was in, lots of neighbours or other families would often just drop a little message here and there, telling you what was going on as well” (IP: 18).

**Sources of knowledge of the phenomenon.**

In addition to knowledge of family contexts, the data revealed that interview and focus group participant teachers gained knowledge of the phenomenon of separation or divorce through their enactive experiences—professional and personal experiences. Participants gained knowledge from their professional life experiences. Participants spoke about gaining knowledge about parental separation and divorce and young children in their day-to-day interactions with young children, transferring knowledge gained from related professional development sessions, engaging in their own professional development, and sourcing specialist personnel.

Teachers gained knowledge of the phenomenon of parental separation or divorce informally through their day-to-day professional interactions with young children at school who were experiencing parental separation and divorce. They spoke about their knowledge of the phenomenon that “comes from witnessing families and children that I deal with” (IP: 18), and that knowledge is “picked up as you go” (IP: 16). Another participant confirmed that her “knowledge...comes from what I see in the workplace” (IP: 1). A different participant said her “knowledge...or where my understanding...is not from reading about it. It’s not from somebody talking to me about it. It’s directly from the experiences I’ve had... [with] the children” (IP: 13). Participants have suggested that this knowledge has accumulated and evolved over their years of teaching.

While participants had not received formal professional development directly related to parental separation and divorce and young children, they had engaged in
other kinds of professional development about related issues such as child welfare and child protection. One participant confirmed that she had not received professional development “specifically for divorce and separation but...under the umbrella of welfare” (IP: 17). Another participant disclosed that she experienced “professional development days. Maybe not on those topics as such but in [child protection] and everything like that” (IP: 8). Participants suggested that they used these related professional development sessions to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Participants engaged in professional self-development through personal research. For example, this personal research was undertaken when they were faced with a puzzling situation. One participant spoke of “reading articles in the newspaper and theories in today’s world about how all these separations and divorces affect children or don’t affect children” (IP: 6). Another participant explained that she sourced literature “on the Internet, [and] in my professional development books” (IP: 8). She explained, “If it’s a particular something that’s happening... I might read up on a little bit more about it; how can I help?” (IP: 8). These participants used the Internet, books and newspaper articles to inform their pedagogic decisions.

Participants spoke of sourcing knowledge from specialist school personnel such as psychologists and behaviour management specialists who were able to share their knowledge regarding parental stress factors and the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children. One participant spoke about “the psychologist that comes in and she is on hand...she gives advice” (IP: 1). Another participant spoke of “a lot of specialists like psychologists and behaviour management specialists come and talk to us” (IP: 12). Of the participants with access
to specialist personnel at school, most reported these colleagues as valuable and respected sources of information.

Another source of knowledge of the phenomenon of separation and divorce was from their personal life. Many participants (10 out of 21, 48 percent) acquired knowledge in this way. Participants identified these sources of knowledge as their experience with their own separation and divorce, or the separation and divorce of family members or friends. In the following excerpt, this participant explained that she had lived through separation and divorce while her own children were young. Therefore, she claimed to have “learned a lot” (IP: 4) from these experiences. She explained:

I’ve got personal knowledge...Personally separated two years ago and I have three daughters...I think I learned a lot from the parents’ side of things that way. There are a lot of things that you can’t understand fully until you’ve gone through it yourself (IP: 4).

Other participants discussed their observations of the experiences of family members and friends. One participant spoke of gaining knowledge about parental separation and divorce through her personal “experience because my [own] parents are separated” (IP: 11). Another participant spoke about how “three out of...six [siblings] have divorced” (IP: 14). She continued to explain that she had “learn[ed] from the experience of what happens” (IP: 14) by observing her siblings experiences. Another interview participant spoke about observing the experiences of friends experiencing separation or divorce. She related how she was personally affected by these experiences and how she thought young children may also be affected. She explained:
If you’ve got a good friend or someone in your own life and there’s a breakdown...how it affects you personally. So you can imagine it being quite traumatic for a child if there’s something that’s been in place and suddenly it changes dramatically (IP: 3).

In the excerpts above, participants spoke about observing the process of parental separation and divorce and the emotional “trauma” experienced by themselves, their parents and their children.

Not all participant teachers, however, had personal life experiences with separation and divorce, and they acknowledged they lacked these enactive experiences. One participant explained that she had “come from a very boring nuclear family where it's all very simple and I haven't had any experience with that side of things” (IP: 9). Another participant revealed that she did not have any personal life experiences with separation or divorce to refer to. She explained that her “parents were married until my father died... in either side of our families, there [are] no divorces. So I don't have any hands on experience at all” (IP: 19).

**Summary of sources of teachers’ knowledge.**

This section has detailed the variety of sources of knowledge that provided teachers with details of young children’s family context surrounding parental separation and divorce. Sources of teachers’ knowledge were largely informal. Young children were identified as the primary source of knowledge. Teachers relied on informal observations and conversations with young children to acquire knowledge of their family circumstance. Teachers were informed of the family context from children’s parents; however, parents often did not share information until the need arose. Similarly, teachers learned about the context of children’s family context from other informal school and community-based sources. Teachers
were often left to rely on their professional and personal life enactive experiences as sources of knowledge to assist them to understand the family context. These informal knowledge sources were haphazard, inconsistent, and inefficient sources for teachers to rely on.

### 4.3.3 Teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon.

Teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon refers to the content of early childhood teachers’ knowledge regarding the impact of parental separation and divorce. Participants disclosed substantial knowledge of (a) parental stress factors, (b) the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children, and (c) young children’s positive adjustment to parental separation or divorce.

**Teachers’ knowledge of parental stress factors.**

Parental stress factors that teachers identified as resulting from parental separation or divorce were compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict.

The majority of interview participants (16 out of 21, 76 percent) spoke about the effects of compromised parenting on young children and the factors leading to it. Participants further described factors that led to compromised parenting of young children as being characterised by less attentive parenting, parental absence, parental distress, non-authoritative parenting, and reduction of parental supervision.

Some participants (8 out of 21, 38 percent) observed that parents became less attentive of young children’s needs because of parental separation or divorce. Participants understood less attentive parenting to be the residing parent becoming overwhelmed and exhausted, and dealing with their own stress related to the separation or divorce. Indicators of less attentive parenting behaviours were evident in homework not being supervised, a decline in the quality of children’s meals,
observations by teachers, conversations with children, young children reporting they were left for long periods of time in front of the television, and even verbal abuse of young children.

In the following excerpt, this teacher demonstrated knowledge of myriad factors that a newly single parent may confront. In this instance, the parent was exhausted because she had worked long hours to alleviate economic disadvantage for the family. As a result, the single mother had no time for herself and resorted to the television or DVDs to keep children occupied while she was busy. Subsequently, the teacher understood that parenting had become compromised. The teacher explained:

Mum's in and out and working long hours, and can't do this and can't do that...Mum's just struggling to exist; no time to listen to them read, tellies on, DVDs,... So I think it's really difficult. There's so many things impacting on them. Poor nutrition...(IP: 10).

Teachers were aware of the issues that arose for children who lived between two households. In this situation, school resources could be misplaced. Teachers perceived that parenting might become less attentive and disorganised. For example, parents losing touch with school routines such as home reading. One teacher explained, “Things like...the reader cover isn’t there...it’s been left at the other parent’s home” (IP: 18). Teachers were conscious that this situation was difficult for young children when they did not have the equipment they need for school each day. One participant spoke about “even simple things like readers were being left at this house and things like that were really hard for him” (IP: 9). Another participant also described lost essentials:

Sometimes when kids go [away on] weekend things get lost. I left that at Dad's, or I left that at Mum's, or I don’t know where it is, it's gone astray, it might be
in Dad’s car. So there’s all that interruption too where they lose books or something that they need for school and they haven’t got it (IP: 20).

Some participants (6 out of 21, 29 percent) spoke of the impact of parental absence and reduced levels of contact young children may have with both parents. Teachers observed changes in patterns of parental contact with one or both parents, and saw contact with a non-resident parent diminish following parental separation and divorce, immediately or over time, as the following participant explained:

Those things that were first created, when they first divorced, like the telephone calls and the visits where dad spent time with his children...have sort of taken a turn and [the father] doesn’t devote the same amount of time to them (IP: 1).

Another participant was acutely aware of the impact of the absence of one parent on young children. In this instance, the young girl had very little contact with her non-resident parent. The teacher recounted the touching story of a young girl yearning for contact with her absent father. The teacher said, “She talks about her dad all the time and she often writes him letters and stuff like that in writing time. She has little to no contact with him” (IP: 9).

In the following excerpt, this teacher revealed her knowledge of the disappointment experienced by young children who were “let down” by a non-resident parent failing to visit. Evocatively she spoke of “the rollercoaster the child would go on, you know the excitement of going with the other parent but maybe the let down if they didn’t turn up or it wasn’t such a good visit” (IP: 18).

Some interview participants (6 out of 21, 29 percent) were aware of parental distress, and parents’ difficulty adjusting to their separation and divorce. Teachers
were aware of the impact parental distress may have on children. One participant explained that “mum was upset all the time, she was crying and he [the child] just didn’t know how to cope with it” (IP: 20). This participant indicated that young children might become confused as a result. Another participant described a parent as being “more frazzled...because they’d become a single parent” (IP: 18) and she “knew that things weren’t getting done, like the reading at home or even just the care for the child (IP: 18). In the above excerpts, participants displayed knowledge of the impact parental separation or divorce on parents’ wellbeing and the flow on effects to their children.

Some participants (5 out of 21, 24 percent) described their observations of changes in parenting styles, for example, an increase in non-authoritative parenting. Participants seemed attuned to the reasons for non-authoritative parenting, such as some parents striving to be the more popular parent with the giving of excessive gifts. One participant explained that she would “often find that one parent or both parents will [try] to be the more popular parent. They'll buy things, material things...It becomes a bit of a competition” (IP: 20). Participants also spoke of non-authoritative parenting in the form of relaxing with house rules, and changing rules and expectations of children again, to win over the children. One participant stated that “there will be one parent that tries to give them presents, give them toys, let them do whatever they want to do, to try and win them over” (IP: 12). Another participant revealed that she “noticed that when he went to Dad's, Dad seemed to flout the rules,... keep him up late, so he'd be tired the next day; or he wouldn't have time to hear him read” (IP: 21). In the above excerpts, interview participants suggested differing parenting styles could cause parents to clash with each other, with one parent implementing a non-authoritative parenting style in opposition to the
other. Participants also identified subtle low levels of parental conflict with parents unable to maintain continuity in parenting styles.

Two participants (10 percent) reported a lack of or a reduction of parental supervision. One participant linked reduced parental supervision to serious longer-term effects such as delinquency later in life. She explained:

The kids...from a young age...get left to their own devices; get left to fend for themselves a lot of the time. So then, down the track, once they get into high school, you can almost see the process happening (IP: 11).

Five interview participants (24 percent) spoke of the impact of economic disadvantage. One participant said that she had an “understanding... [of the impact of] reduced [financial] capacity” (IP: 18) on families experiencing parental separation and divorce. In the following excerpt, this interview participant tells of her understanding that a single parent may not be able to provide the same material support for the child as occurred when the family was intact. She explained, “The single parent [may not] be able to afford excursions and new shoes and lunch orders or whatever it is that the child may like to have” (IP: 18). Like others, this teacher knew that separation and divorce would alter families’ economic situation, potentially resulting in financial strain and economic disadvantage for children.

Nine interview participants (18 percent) spoke of the impact that parental conflict surrounding parental separation and divorce may have on young children. They identified degrees of parental conflict with consciousness of how high levels of parental conflict may affect the adjustment of young children to their new situation. They also expressed awareness that children’s positive adjustments were more readily made when there were low to moderate levels of parental conflict. Demonstrating awareness of conflict in some families, these participants alluded to
communication problems and acrimony, “There's so much...not hatred, but that sort of thing, but if they really don't communicate any more, then it's so hard on the kids. They are shoved from one to the other” (IP: 7).

Interview participants clearly linked high levels of parental conflict to more serious effects on young children. One participant explained, “If it's tumultuous or acrimonious, and there's a lot of tension and things in the house, you would certainly see that in a child” (IP: 14). Participants described the symptoms they observed in children such as stress, sadness, anger, and mood changes. The following observations were typical:

The antagonism between mum and dad and when they're going to be with who and it's got to a stage that he's suffered great stress (IP: 5).

He can come to school quite often and [would] be very sulky and surly and morose. That's been like that since the start of the year. He can be very much like this. He can be smiling and be quite happy...it might be with a fight at home and that they're arguing and he comes to school like that (IP: 10).

In the absence of highly charged parental emotion and conflict, teachers acknowledged there were better outcomes for young children. They observed young children adjusting more readily to their new situations when parental conflict was low. They explained:

[It] really depends on how it's handled I think. Very young children like grade ones...if it's handled without high emotion, negative emotions, I think they can adapt reasonably well and quite quickly (IP: 14).
I’ve seen some really terrific parenting where the kids are just so relaxed about their situation and confident and the parents obviously don’t have a lot of bitterness (IP: 3).

In the focus group interview, participants confirmed these findings regarding teachers’ knowledge of parental stress factors. Focus group participants, however, were divided on what particular stress factors they perceived as having the greatest adverse effect on young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. One focus group participant cited economic disadvantage (FGP: 1) as having the single most adverse impact on young children. Another focus group participant cited parental conflict (FGP: 2). A different focus group participant (FGP: 3) cited compromised parenting as most detrimental to young children. All three factors have been indicated in the research literature findings as important.

**Teachers’ knowledge of the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children.**

Participants discussed the externalising and internalising behaviours displayed by young children, and the emotional and academic impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. As acknowledged in section 2.1, the preliminary review of the literature was consulted to determine theoretical codes during analysis of the data. This comparison between data and the literature revealed that participants in this study possessed substantive knowledge of the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children.

All interview participants (100 percent) observed behavioural changes in young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. They mentioned children’s range of adverse externalising (17 out of 21, 81 percent) and internalising behaviours (15 out of 21, 71 percent). Externalising behaviours are adverse overt
displays of negative conduct such as general misbehaviour, disruptiveness, aggression, moodiness, and short temperedness (Amato, 2006; Hetherington, 2006). Internalising behaviours are behaviours that are turned inwards on the self such as anxiety, lethargy, being withdrawn, lacking concentration, separation anxiety, and being emotional (unhappy, teary and angry) (Kelly, 2000; Strohschein, 2005).

Interview participants spoke of young children displaying externalising behaviours such as misbehaving and being unsettled at school. These participants observed behavioural changes in young children following access visits mostly with fathers. They explained:

You can nearly always tell if they've been at Dads for the weekend. Their behaviour is just that much off track pretty much when they come back (IP: 11).

They've gone to the father's for the weekend—then they might come in on the Monday and they'll be noticeably unsettled; just not as calm and relaxed, as normally they would be towards the end of the week (IP: 12).

In some instances, children’s troubles were manifest as moodiness or short temperedness, sometimes including violence. This participant explained, “He was quite moody. He would lose his temper quickly” (IP: 10). Participants noticed the disruptive behaviours and reported witnessing incidents such as the following:

He'll pick up chairs; he'll throw things. He's just an angry little boy...He can't sit - like, the start of the morning, if he's sitting, he might be niggling or when they do the roll call, he'll answer in a silly voice (IP: 16).

Interview participants talked about their observations of aggression towards other children and sometimes adults in the classroom. They explained:
He was quite aggressive...and wouldn't do his work and [was] easily distracted and distracting others (IP: 2).

He's lashing out, he's aggressive, and he just runs off—total change in his behaviour (IP: 12).

This aggression had been observed both in the classroom and within the broader school environment. In the following excerpt, this participant described an instance when she witnessed aggression in the playground from a young child experiencing parental separation or divorce. The child explained his behaviour. The teacher related:

I was in the playground on yard duty and he was involved in a bit of a dust up where he'd hit somebody else and was quite aggressive to this other kid...He just said he was angry and this other kid had hurt him, and so he'd hit back. He was just feeling very angry...He just said he was angry and he had to fight back with this particular kid, because that's what you do when you're angry (IP: 10).

This excerpt, although uncommon, serves as a broader signal of some teachers being attuned to the serious consequences of prolonged exposure to conflict.

Interview participants also spoke of observing internalising behaviours such as anxiety and stress in young children, and the effect this had on young children’s emotional adjustment such as children appearing emotionally stressed, unhappy, and lethargic. This participant explained her observations of lethargy and unhappiness:

One of the children in my class...usually stayed with her mother. But whenever she has to go to her dad...she used to get stressed. Her behaviour in the class used to be affected...even like energy levels and things like that. Not happy, not interacting on that day, crying, teary (IP: 16).
Interview participants described young children experiencing parental separation or divorce as becoming withdrawn. They explained the effects this had on children’s learning at school such as declines in concentration, motivation, and effort with their schoolwork. Teachers displayed differing levels of tolerance for such behaviour, as is evidenced in the following:

A lot of kids will get withdrawn and they don't put in, the concentration level drops. Some of them can't be bothered; why should I? (IP: 20).

The behaviours of children, they can manifest themselves in a whole lot of ways, like just being overtired or extremely quiet and withdrawn when that wasn’t their way of operating (IP: 17).

Some kids can bottle it up but you can see that there's something not right, ...they're just a bit more withdrawn in the classroom (IP: 11).

Interview participants observed young children experiencing difficulty separating from a parent on school mornings. One described this as “separation anxiety. The child may have gone from being easy to come to school, they get all worried and nervous about when it's time to leave their parent” (IP: 14).

At times participants showed much empathy when they talked about young children becoming emotional, crying, and being difficult to console, as this participant explained:

I had a girl that was in a separation situation and she used to burst into tears lots of times. Really couldn't put her finger on the problem. I gathered that it was stuff going on at home, just built up in her. She's just crying, crying, crying—she would—she was very hard to console (IP: 7).
The majority of interview participants (17 out of 21, 81 percent) discussed the emotional impact of parental separation and divorce on young children, evidenced through children’s comments or behaviours. They noted in particular a lack of confidence. One participant mentioned young children losing “feelings of self-worth” (IP: 18). Another participant elaborated that young children experienced a loss of confidence and self-esteem. This teacher also acknowledged that children’s responses to parental separation and divorce varied. She explained, “I think in the start...some of them tend to lose...confidence or self-esteem—as from my observation and very reserved, especially in social situations” (IP: 15).

Many interview participants (12 out of 21, 57 percent) spoke of the academic impact on young children because of their experience with parental separation and divorce, often linking this to the emotional impact. They highlighted children’s difficulties in making academic progress when they were upset, anxious, and worried. One participant stated explicitly, “they're upset so they can't learn properly!” (IP: 3). Another participant confirmed that, in such circumstances, she did not “think... [children] can learn particularly [when they are anxious and worried]” (IP: 14). She went on to explain that she thought “a highly anxious child who is worried about things; I don't think they really take it in” (IP: 14).

Interview participants also linked diminished academic progress to children’s adverse behavioural responses to parental separation or divorce. This participant explained, “They get angry, they're disruptive, so they can't—they're not learning. They are the kids that we have the most problems with. You're worried about their rate of learning” (IP: 16).
Teachers were clearly aware of the impact of separation and divorce on children’s learning. Additionally, participants also talked about young children becoming disengaged or unmotivated in their learning at school which one teacher noted resulted in regression in learning. She explained, “Academically his progress has really—it regressed for a little bit because he just lost interest and it was taking him so much to adjust to this new routine” (IP: 9).

Participants expressed concern for the long-term effects of diminished academic progress, as some young children continued to fall further behind in their schoolwork. They explained:

Issues of learning can become a standstill. They can lose a lot of time in their learning, just readjusting to the whole situation of what’s happened to them (IP: 18).

He's getting older and he's just going to fall further and further behind. It's a vicious circle with them (IP: 16).

**Young children’s positive adjustment to parental separation and divorce.**

In contrast, some interview participants (10 out of 21, 48 percent) were aware that young children can make positive adjustments to parental separation and divorce. For example, one participant commented, “You would never know” (IP: 7) a child in her class had experienced parental separation or divorce. The child seemed to show no signs of adverse effects. Importantly, teachers associated positive adjustment with the influence of a supportive school environment. One participant explained, “sometimes...school is their happy place, their stable place...that is where they put in and they enjoy their school life” (IP: 20).
Teachers were aware that young children adjusted more readily to parental separation and divorce when their parents had made positive adjustments themselves. Exemplifying children’s ability to make adequate adjustment, one participant suggested that young children “can adjust quite well” to their parents’ separation and divorce. She went on to explain that it depended “on how it's [the separation or divorce] handled” (IP: 14), adding that active parenting, minimal economic disruption, and low levels of parental conflict contributed to positive adjustment in her view.

**Summary of teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon.**

This section has detailed teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce. Teachers revealed substantive knowledge of the impact of parental stress factors related to parental separation and divorce—compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict. Teachers explained their knowledge of how these stress factors may manifest in young children, as a variety of externalising and internalising behaviours, which influenced their emotional wellbeing and academic progress. Teachers also acknowledged that some young children made positive adjustments to parental separation and divorce. Factors that contributed to children’s positive adjustment were the influence of a supportive school environment, and parents’ positive adjustment to their separation and divorce. While teachers imparted substantive knowledge of the phenomenon, this knowledge was individual to each teacher because of the informal, and at times ad-hoc sources of knowledge, as described in section 4.2.2.

**4.3.4 Not formally informed.**

Many participant teachers (13 out of 21, 62 percent) expressed that they often were not formally informed of the context of children’s parents’ separation or
divorce, or knowledge of the phenomenon. This property is included because it seemed important to acknowledge situations in which knowledge may have been needed but was incomplete or non-existent. The property “not formally informed” signals the absence of teachers’ knowledge but also its importance, (as will be discussed in chapter five).

As presented in section 4.3.2, participants revealed they accessed a range of sources of knowledge about parental separation or divorce. These knowledge sources, however, were largely informal. It was clear from the data that formal knowledge of the family context was not always forthcoming from children, family, or other school sources as the following statements suggest:

Mostly the children I find don’t tend to tell you (IP: 6).

The parents often don’t tell us (IP: 19).

Sometimes the parent will come and see you because they’re concerned for their kids, but that doesn’t happen that often (IP: 20).

Sometimes they’ll [parents] come to visit...the principal or let someone know at the school that’ll pass the message on... [However,] that tends not to happen that often...more often than not...you find out by some other way (IP: 6).

If they [parents] do tell us, they’ll tell the principal, but because of privacy they’re not allowed to tell the teachers that are directly involved with that child” (IP: 19).

At a school level, teachers disclosed they were informed of young children’s parents’ separation or divorce and the family context surrounding this separation or divorce after the teacher had made an inquiry with the principal. It seems the
principal may hold knowledge of the family context but would not share this knowledge with the classroom teacher until prompted. This teacher explained how she “asked and made a comment to the principal and then she told me” (IP: 2). The teacher revealed that she “didn’t know really before then” (IP: 2). This information was not made readily available to teachers at the classroom level.

Teachers have been forced to rely on their interpretations of their observations and conversations with children because they had not being formally informed of the family context regarding parental separation or divorce. One participant explained that she watched and interpreted the behaviours of children to gain knowledge. She explained, “Sometimes you don't even get the knowledge, so it's watching behaviours” (IP: 1). Another interview participant explained that she interpreted cues from young children’s conversations. She explained, “You’ve really got to do a lot of listening, I think and reading between the lines sometimes” (IP: 20). Focus group participants confirmed this.

This interview participant explained:

I would probably say that, in some instances, we're not informed or we haven't been told. People can be very private about these things and it's not until a hindsight where you realise that there's been a change in behaviour. Then you find out... something has happened at home (IP: 4).

In contrast, however, some focus group participants did not consider not being informed to be an issue in instances where young children had made positive adjustments to parental separation or divorce. This focus group participant explained, “If a child is fairly well balanced... if the parents have handled the whole thing really well and there's visitation, it's all calm and it's been adequately related...you don’t even know it” (FGP: 3).
Returning to the interviews, participants also disclosed that discussions about parental separation and divorce were absent from their pre-service training or in-service professional development. Hence, they did not possess formal knowledge of the phenomenon. In fact, a number of participants said that they considered they lacked knowledge regarding young children and parental separation and divorce. One participant stated plainly, “I don’t have any specific knowledge” (IP: 10). Another participant said, “The actual nuts and bolts of separation I don’t think I...have a great knowledge of that” (IP: 17).

Participants spoke of the lack of professional development opportunities that specifically addressed parental stress factors, the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children, or appropriate pedagogical practices for early childhood teachers to implement. In fact, no participant had ever undertaken professional development specifically addressing parental separation and divorce. One participant stated, “Over all my years of...professional development...there’s been very little specifically about that” (IP: 6). Another participant said, “I haven’t done any extra study about that or what to expect or how to handle it” (IP: 1).

**Summary of not formally informed.**

In this section it has been revealed that teachers are frequently not formally informed of young children’s family context, the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce, or how to respond to young children. Teachers not being informed was largely due to the informal way their knowledge has been acquired. Teachers have interpreted their observations of young children and their interactions with children and their parents. Data showed the sharing of knowledge about young children’s family context between colleagues was inconsistent. Knowledge of the phenomenon
of parental separation and divorce varied between teachers. None of the participants had ever received formal pre-service training or professional development related specifically to parental separation and divorce, or how to respond to young children in these family circumstances. Rather, teachers relied on extracting relevant details from other professional development. Teachers themselves concluded that they lacked formal knowledge.

4.3.5 Summary of major category one: Teacher knowledge.

In this section, teachers’ knowledge about parental separation or divorce has been detailed. In particular, the various sources of teachers’ knowledge whereby teachers draw together knowledge of the family context, the family circumstances surrounding parental separation, young children’s experience with parental separation or divorce, and knowledge of the phenomenon have been identified. Teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon has been detailed; that is, teachers’ knowledge of parental stress factors such as the impact of compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict on young children. Teachers’ knowledge of young children’s varying responses, the emotional and academic impact of parental separation or divorce on young children was detailed, as well as teachers’ knowledge of young children’s positive adjustments to parental separation or divorce. The concept that teachers were not formally informed of the phenomenon or the family context emerged strongly throughout the findings.

Participants relied heavily on the interpretation of their observations; conversations with children; the product of their collaborations with colleagues, parents, and community members; and interpretation of their enactive experiences when sourcing knowledge regarding parental separation or divorce. Therefore, early childhood teachers’ knowledge regarding parental separation and divorce is wide and
varied. It is a personal knowledge that is dependent on the individual teachers’
unique enactive experiences.

While participant teachers revealed substantial knowledge of the phenomenon
of parental separation and divorce, their knowledge was largely sourced through
informal sources; that is, teachers gained much of their knowledge through
observational, collaborative, and enactive experiences, as opposed to formal
knowledge sources such as professional development sessions and professional
literature. The informal nature of teachers’ knowledge regarding the phenomenon of
parental separation or divorce suggests that the knowledge of early childhood
teachers as a profession may be inadequate to provide teachers with accurate,
comprehensive, and consistent knowledge to inform their work with young children
experiencing parental separation and divorce. The next section, major category two,
teacher thinking, describes how early childhood teachers think about their knowledge
when making pedagogical decisions for working with young children experiencing
parental separation or divorce.

4.4 Major Category Two: Teacher Thinking

4.4.1 Section overview.

Major category two, teacher thinking, describes the type and nature of
teachers’ thinking that guided the practice of teachers in this sample when they
worked with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. In the
interviews, teachers were not asked to talk directly about their thinking. Rather, this
theme emerged from the data during analysis in the process that Corbin and Strauss
(2008) refer to as “elaborating” (p. 227). New concepts can be derived for data in this
way. Just prior to the focus group being conducted, it became clear that teachers’
thinking was a topic that needed further exploration. Major category two, teacher
thinking, is a critical phase in the decision-making process, as depicted in Figure 4.2. It provides the important link between major category one, teacher knowledge, and major category three, teacher action.

The focus group was a pivotal point in the development of major category two. Data from focus group participants enabled the identification of reflexive thinking as the predominant thinking type that teachers engaged in to inform their pedagogical decisions. In the context of this study, reflexive thinking involves critical reflection about professional and personal experiences, where teachers understand their experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how they can use that knowledge to inform future practice (Stingu, 2012). Participants spoke about four types of reflexive thinking specific to this study, as illustrated in Figure 4.4. These are (a) developing understandings, (b) applying experiences, (c) anticipating outcomes, and (d) applying intuition.

![Figure 4.4](image_url)

*Figure 4.4. Major category two: The study’s four types of reflexive thinking. Properties define the components of the category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).*
The key finding for major category two is—pedagogical decisions were informed by participant teachers’ reflexive thinking that was related to the unique characteristics of specific children and their family circumstances. This section will begin by detailing the data on reflexive thinking that were added to the study from the focus group, as these data were fundamental in the development of this category. The four types of reflexive thinking identified will then be elaborated.

4.4.2 Reflexive thinking.

Teachers’ reflexive thinking refers to teachers’ internal and personal critical reflection on professional and personal experiences that informs their pedagogical decisions and practice (Stingu, 2012). One focus group participant aptly described reflexive thinking as “reflection...with yourself” (FGP: 4). Another focus group participant added, “It might be a professional development that you did a few weeks ago” (FGP: 3) that became the basis for reflection that informed pedagogical practice. She further explained that she would trial an action then “reflect and reflect and reflect” (FGP: 3) on why the action was successful or unsuccessful. She likened her process to “a sounding board, you just talk it through [with yourself]” (FGP: 3).

Participants reflected on the ways in which a specific child’s circumstance or response appeared similar to one they had experienced previously or that they recalled a colleague experienced. One focus group participant spoke about her understanding of experiences in similar social contexts. She referred to reflecting on experiences as being informed by “history” (FGP: 2). She elaborated that “history shows you sometimes it will manifest itself in difficult behaviour...so you refer back to [an experience when an action] worked to change behaviour” when deciding on what action to take in the current context. Similarly, another focus group participant spoke about “observing other people deal with that particular child or that particular
behaviour” (FGP: 3), thus referencing her colleagues’ experiences to inform her own pedagogical practice.

Other interview participants mirrored these insightful quotes. Teachers seemed to be telling the same general story of how they developed understandings, applied experiences, anticipated outcomes, and applied intuition when making pedagogical decisions.

4.4.3 Developing understandings.

The first type of reflexive thinking is developing understandings. Teachers engaged in critical reflection about their experiences with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to develop understandings of children’s experiences. Teachers used these understandings to inform pedagogical practice. All interview participants (100 percent) spoke about developing understandings of young children’s unique characteristics, and family circumstances surrounding parental separation and divorce that informed their pedagogical decisions and actions. Developing understandings is a cognitive process that allowed teachers to come to terms with the situation with which they are immediately confronted. This is distinct from teachers’ knowledge, as described previously in section 4.3. Teachers’ knowledge, in section 4.3, described the content of teachers’ knowledge acquired from a variety of sources to construct their knowledge of the phenomenon generally. Developing understandings relates to the process of teachers applying reflexive thinking to their knowledge to build understandings of particular children’s unique circumstances and experiences with parental separation and divorce.

This thinking process is important because teachers modified their strategies in relation to individual children with whom they were working, based on their understandings of that child and their perceived response patterns. One interview
participant (IP: 2) spoke about the school counsellor coming to meet a particular child each week. She spoke about quietly going to the child and telling him the counsellor had arrived. The teacher explained that this child never drew attention to himself or his family situation. The teacher compared this child to another who, in contrast, drew much attention to himself when the counsellor arrived to work with him by displaying externalising behaviour. She made this comparison to explain her thinking about the unique characteristics of particular children and how this informed the strategies she used.

Another interview participant spoke in depth about her developing understanding in a case when she herself was pregnant and was leaving the school to go on maternity leave. A child who had experienced parental separation and divorce was displaying externalising behaviours. The teacher tentatively interpreted that his behaviour towards her and others had taken a turn for the worst because he was feeling upset about her imminent departure. She linked his feelings of rejection by his teacher to the rejection he experienced following his parents’ separation. The process of developing these understandings informed her actions. At school, she decided to “give him as much attention as possible and...Make him realise that it’s not just him..., it’s lots of other kids too” (IP: 16) that she will be leaving. She understood the child was experiencing “this separation thing again” (IP: 16). Acting on these understandings, the teacher introduced the child to his new teacher with the aim of allowing him time to adjust to a new situation. She structured emotional support to help “him realise that this other...teacher, isn’t going to leave him. She’s going to look after him like the last one” (IP: 16). This type of elementary psychology arose from her critically reflecting on his behaviour at school and his
family circumstance, and trying to make sense of the situation that would enable some kind of intervention or response.

Participants also spoke about developing understandings of family circumstances surrounding parental separation or divorce. One participant revealed her developing understanding that particular children were experiencing “traumas at home” and a growing awareness that “the household was under a lot of pressure” (IP: 9). When these children were involved in inappropriate behaviour at school the teacher understood this behaviour was related, in large part to the family context. She reasoned it was “not as an excuse, but more an explanation” (IP: 9). As a consequence of this thinking, she would “deal with it a little bit more in-house, as opposed to ringing home—punishment is a little less severe. It’s more just a nice talk” (IP: 9).

Participants also indicated that they related understandings of children to their family context and modified their responses to children based on their understanding of that context. Such modification might take the form of showing empathy, enhancing continuity, and making adjustments. Another interview participant spoke of her developing understanding of the family context and the impact on particular young children. She explained:

Sometimes...one of the children in my class...usually stayed with her mother. But whenever she has to go to her dad... she used to get stressed. Her behaviour in the class used to be affected, even like energy levels and things like that. Not happy, not interacting on that day, crying, teary (IP: 15).

In the above excerpt, the teacher’s developing understandings were held together by what she referred to as empathy. She explained she would be “a bit more empathetic” towards that child to “give them a sense of security, supporting
them...boosting their confidence and self-esteem” (IP: 15). She explained the mechanism of this thinking, “once you found out what the reason is or what they need, you then change yourself or your strategies accordingly” (IP: 15).

Another interview participant gave examples of how her developing understanding prompted her to think about the role of consistency and continuity. She explained:

I think it's really important that - because often with these kids, turmoil that's happening at home...when they come to school, that's the only consistency and continuity... So it's really important that you still keep that in place so that they know that when they come to school this is what's expected, this is what they have to do, these are the rules, these are the expectations (IP: 11).

In the same way, another interview participant told how her developing understanding of the family context activated her thinking about the structure of the school day. She explained:

When they come to school on a Monday, if they’ve been in a home where there’s not many boundaries, no routine, they come to school and they’re very unsettled. I think that’s why we structure our work, our day...The kids come in; they have a visual planner on the board so they know exactly what’s happening for the whole day. If there’s a change that’s going to occur, then I always make sure I let them know as soon as I know, so that they’re aware of it. I think routine is critical and structure is critical for those kids particularly so (IP: 12).

Similarly, in the following excerpt, this interview participant revealed that her developing understanding led her to think about her classroom routine. She came to anticipate that some children were always late to school “because of mum not being able to get them organised” (IP: 19) in the morning, reflecting that in some
households mornings were tumultuous. In light of this thinking, the teacher programmed “silent reading first so that they come into a quiet, calm room” (IP: 19). By programming silent reading first thing each day, the children did not miss out on the formal lessons for the day. It soon became apparent, however, the very children she had targeted with this change were then missing out on silent reading practice each day. The teacher reconsidered saying, “Usually those kids are the ones that really need to be reading and they’re missing out because they don’t turn up for 15, 20 minutes” (IP: 19). Reflecting further, she enlisted a helper “from the community who used to come in and hear them read during the day, just to make up for that time.” (IP: 19). This scenario demonstrates this teacher’s incrementally developing understandings and recursive reflexive thinking.

The importance of emotions in developing understandings was also evident in the data. Some participants seemed to engage their own emotions when developing their understanding of young children and their experience with parental separation or divorce. One interview participant described the family circumstance of a particular young child whose parents were engaged in court proceedings over the custody of the child. She said it was “very traumatic for him emotionally and it’s taken a lot of adjusting for him and...he’s been very, very emotional still” (IP: 9). Reflecting on her own emotional capacity, she said, “As an adult I would find that hard to cope with” (IP: 9). This kind of thinking resulted in the school focusing on providing various forms of emotional support. Another interview participant considered the emotional impact a friend’s separation and divorce had on her. This personal experience heightened her openness to thinking about young children’s experience with parental separation or divorce. She indicated that imagination might come into play: “So you can imagine it being quite traumatic for a child if there’s
something that’s been in place and suddenly it changes dramatically.” This type of thinking seems similar, but also different from the empathy experienced by IP: 15 described previously in this section.

Focus group participants also spoke about developing understandings of the unique characteristics of young children. One focus group participant spoke about crystallising understandings of the “motivation” (FGP: 5) of young children. Another focus group participant also spoke about developing an understanding of “the student’s motivation for the behaviour” (FGP: 2). By referring to children’s motivation, perhaps teachers were alluding to their reasoning about why children behave or react the way they do. Inseparable from this thinking was the need to “build relationships with the children so they’re comfortable in sharing, so you get more knowledge and get a better understanding of where the kids are coming from” (FGP: 1). Another focus group participant poignantly, but cautiously, explained that her developing understandings led her to “therefore [think about] what you can change” (FGP: 2), hinting at the important role of teacher thinking as the link between teacher knowledge and teacher action.

**Summary of developing understandings.**

Teachers’ reflexive thinking to develop understandings of individual children and their unique experience with parental separation and divorce, the family context, and the present situation was instrumental in informing teachers’ future pedagogical practice. Teachers developed understandings based on their reflexive thinking about their experiences with young children, their families, school personnel, and members from the wider community. They sought to understand the causes of particular children’s reactions, and the consequences of their actions.
4.4.4 Applying experiences.

The second type of reflexive thinking is applying experiences. Applying experiences refers to teachers thinking back on their past enactive experiences—their professional and personal life experiences with separation and divorce—and using that knowledge to inform future practice. Many interview participants (12 out of 21, 57 percent) spoke about applying experiences from analogous situations to inform their pedagogical decisions.

Many interview participants (11 out of 21, 52 percent) spoke about their professional life experiences informing and shaping their pedagogical decisions. Professional life experiences included teachers critically reflecting on their observations and conversations with children and their parents, interactions with colleagues, and transferring knowledge from related professional development. This participant spoke about:

Transferring knowledge you have with children who have any sort of difficulty in their life or might...have a home life...not functioning in the norm. So you tend to use those sorts of skills just with all children, with any children with issues (IP: 6).

Focus group participants also spoke about reflecting on their professional life experiences to assist in approaching a situation in an effective way. One focus group participant explained, “You may have had a child who has had these experiences prior” (FGP: 3), prompting a kind of reflection or thinking back. Another focus group participant said that she thought “back to a context [when] that [action] worked” (FGP: 2) with another child experiencing parental separation or divorce to inform her current problem solving in a present situation. This focus group participant also spoke about thinking about “what’s been the best approach...based
on this behaviour, from my experience previously” (FGP: 2). These quotations exemplify the reflection on participants’ professional life experiences when working with children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Participants also spoke about applying the lessons learned from past professional life experiences that may have been unsuccessful. In these instances, participants learned what not to do with particular children. This thinking, in turn, prompted them to trial alternatives. One participant recounted a situation involving a particular school procedure that required teachers to request an interview with children’s parents when children engaged in inappropriate behaviour in the playground. On receiving this request from the teacher, a child’s father arrived at school displaying aggressive behaviour towards the teacher and the child. In this instance, the teacher learned what not to do when working with this particular child. She learned not to request an interview with this parent under these circumstances and stated, “I learned never to do that again” (IP: 7) because it placed herself and the child at risk. In future, she thought of alternate actions. Another participant from the focus group encapsulated this thinking when she explained, “You might muck that up entirely that first one, that might backfire badly, but you reflect...you come back, and you try again” (FGP: 3).

Participants not only spoke about applying the lessons learned from their own professional life experiences, but also from the professional life experiences of colleagues. Focus group participants spoke about their reflections on the experiences of colleagues, facilitated by conversations and observing them work. One focus group participant spoke about reflecting with “other teachers about various experiences” (FGP: 3), and “what’s worked in the past” (FGP: 3) and considering how they have dealt “with that particular child or that particular behaviour” (FGP: 3).
Focus group participants suggested that these conversations and observations were informative and helpful.

Some interview participants (3 out of 21, 14 percent) spoke about their reflexive thinking of their personal life experiences that framed their understanding of children’s responses, and linked their knowledge to action in making pedagogical decisions. One participant, for example, reflected on her own separation and divorce when her children were young. She spoke about how her “experience with my own children” (IP: 14) had informed her thinking about children in similar situations. She believed she understood what young children experiencing parental separation and divorce needed. She explained, “I just think children have to feel secure” (IP: 14), and that it was important to “keep everything as it was and fairly...structured...that they [children] can rely on this happens here and this isn’t changing” (IP: 14). Likewise, another teacher reflected on the role of experience in prompting thinking: “There’s a lot of things that you can’t understand fully until you’ve gone through it yourself” (IP: 4).

**Summary of applying experiences.**

In their thinking, participants considered experiences, both professional and personal. Teachers reflected critically on successful professional experiences with other children experiencing parental separation and divorce in similar situations, and on successful and unsuccessful professional experiences, as well as personal experiences. They applied these insights to current situations with children.

**4.4.5 Anticipating outcomes.**

The third type of reflexive thinking is anticipating outcomes. Some interview participants (7 out of 21, 33 percent) spoke about a particular type of future-oriented thinking: anticipating outcomes. Anticipating outcomes involved participants looking
forward, planning action, and deliberating about possible alternatives, to decide on a course of action.

Participants indicated that their anticipation of potential difficulties for children informed their thinking. One participant spoke about these potential difficulties in relation to a particular instance when she was aware that a young child’s belongings were currently packed up ready to move house. For a school activity, the teacher asked children to bring some seashells from home. She revealed, “normally they’d be the type of child that would love to do that sort of thing and want to be the child that’s brought the things along to school” (IP: 6). The teacher anticipated that the child would “feel really left out or embarrassed that they haven’t got something and all the other children have” (IP: 6). Anticipating this outcome, prompted the teacher to modify the activity for this child. Instead, she encouraged the child to borrow a book on seashells from the school library, so the child was included regardless of their family circumstance.

In a different situation, another participant anticipated that some children might not feel included in a planned school event, a father’s day breakfast. The teacher was aware that some children may not be able to bring their father to this event. Instead, he reconceptualised the event as a “Big Men’s Breakfast,” where children could bring any male who was important to them (IP: 5).

Focus group participants also took up the theme of anticipating the outcomes of actions. In the following excerpt, this participant considered the possible consequences of making a wrong decision before taking action. He explained his thinking: “This is a line here and I can feel it’s fragile and if I make the wrong judgement that could be a problem, but if I make a right one then it could really de-fuse things” (FGP: 5).
Individual teachers were able to foresee problems that may arise with particular children based on their thinking about individual children’s responses. One focus group participant spoke about a teacher who was absent one day. Other teachers at the school anticipated a negative reaction from a particular child in the class, so the teachers arranged for this child to spend the day in a classroom in which he was familiar with the teacher. This participant explained:

If we knew a teacher was going to be away with a student who really struggled with separation, we would talk to them about who is another teacher that you know you’re comfortable with, would you like to be with them for the day, because [your teacher is] going to be away. They would actually go and work with that other teacher quite happily for the day and be a model student (FGP: 2).

This kind of anticipatory thinking was dependent on prior knowledge of the child’s situation and her incorporation of previous experiences with this particular child in similar circumstances. It was clear that participating teachers experienced greater and lesser degrees of reflexive insight when they anticipated outcomes.

Moving the focus from individual to collective actions, one interview participant spoke about her thinking that empowered the whole class to respond to a particular child. The situation presented was particularly delicate. The teacher anticipated that there might be a time when she would need to remove the entire class from the room because of a specific child’s behaviour. She spoke with the class and carefully explained this child’s family circumstances, and the impact the family circumstance was having on the child. She explained her thinking about the possibility of an incident arising and requested the assistance of the class if the need arose. This teacher constructed a plan for future action (IP: 1).
Summary of anticipating outcomes.

The data showed that, to anticipate outcomes of teachers’ actions, teachers reflected on their prior experiences. They considered the unique characteristics of individual children and their family circumstance. When anticipating outcomes, teachers were proactive in foreseeing issues that may arise because of planned teacher action. This foresight informed future action at an individual and collective level.

4.4.6 Applying intuition.

The fourth and final type of reflexive thinking is applying intuition. Applying intuition refers to a type of thinking where teachers seem to take action almost unconsciously. Only some interview participants (6 out of 21, 29 percent) referred to this type of thinking. Some referred to intuitive thinking as a mothering instinct. One participant said, “In my instance it’s just the motherly instinct [that] takes over” (IP: 19). She went on to explain, “I tend to probably be more motherly towards those kids...the cuddles and the come over here and tell me. Is there anything you want to tell me?” (IP: 19). Another participant also described her intuitive thinking as natural. She said it was her “natural instinct...to nurture them when they’re sad” (IP: 9). A different participant also spoke about a parenting instinct. Early in her career she “decided, while the children were in my care, they were mine and I would be there to nurture and help them grow and develop” (IP: 8), as if they were her own children. This type of thinking was characterised as personal and natural.

Other interview participants spoke about developing intuition when they felt they had a deep background understanding of the situation. This thinking was swift and virtually automatic. Participants spoke of just knowing what actions to apply due to having had similar experiences in the past. One interview participant suggested
that she had a deep understanding of the personal characteristics of particular young children. She suggested that this deep understanding enabled her to immediately detect that something had changed with particular children or something was not quite right with them. This teacher explained, “it’s intuitive...that I think you get so close to the kids...and you know them well...you can tell...as soon as they walk in” (IP: 17). She concluded, “Intuition makes you take that next step or look for something else” (IP: 17). This participant went on to describe other actions she would engage such as contacting the parent, continuing to monitor the child, being more lenient, and boosting their self-esteem. Again, this rich data shows the link between knowledge, thinking, and action.

**Summary of applying intuition.**

Applying intuition required teachers to reflect on their enactive experiences—professional and personal. Some teachers had been confronted with similar situations on a number of previous occasions; therefore, their practice had become intuitive, where they just knew how to respond to children in similar circumstances almost automatically. Other teachers referred to applying personal intuition, relating the current situation to experiences they had with their own children, or to a natural instinct.

**4.4.7 Summary of major category two: Teacher thinking.**

This section has detailed teacher thinking. That is, the thinking of early childhood teachers that informed their pedagogical practice when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. In particular, focus group participants appeared to engage in reflexive thinking. Reflexive thinking involves teachers reflecting critically about their professional and personal experiences. Such critical reflection means that teachers have to both understand
their experiences in the social context, as well as understand how they can use that knowledge to inform future practice (Stingu, 2012). Interview participants identified four types of reflexive thinking (a) developing understandings of young children’s unique characteristics and family circumstances, (b) applying experiences from teacher’s professional and personal lives, (c) anticipating outcomes of action, and (d) applying intuition.

Teachers engaged in reflexive thinking for pragmatic purposes. In many instances, this pragmatic purpose was to decide on a course of action to apply to address the characteristics or needs of particular young children and their family circumstances. Children’s experiences are unique to them. So too are teachers’ experiences and understandings. It is clear from the data that teachers do not appear to match a clear set of concerning issues with a standard set of solutions. Rather, teachers’ thinking results in their actions being individually crafted to address children’s unique characteristics, their family circumstance, and the demands of present situations. The next section, major category three, teacher action, details the particular actions of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

4.5 Major Category Three: Teacher Action

4.5.1 Section overview.

Teacher action refers to the pedagogical practice of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed two properties within major category three that described teachers’ actions (a) teachers constructing support, and (b) teachers forming partnerships, as illustrated in Figure 4.5. Teachers constructing support comprises the actions of teachers providing emotional, academic, and
behavioural support. Teachers forming partnerships comprises partnerships established with parents, other school personnel, and community members and organisations to promote wellbeing and learning.

Two key findings match the two properties detailed in major category three, as shown in Table 4.1. The first key finding in this category, the study’s key finding five is—participant teachers engaged in a range of pedagogical practices to construct emotional, academic and behavioural support to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances. The second key finding in this category, key finding 6 is—participant teachers formed partnerships with parents, school personnel and community members and organisations to accommodate young children’s personal characteristics and circumstances. This section is organised according to these two key findings.
Figure 4.5. Major category three: Teacher action and its properties and dimensions. Properties define the components of the category. Dimensions describe the variations of a property (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
4.5.2 Teachers constructing support.

Participant teachers constructed emotional, academic, and behavioural support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Constructing emotional support involved providing access to counselling, providing a supportive school environment, promoting self-esteem, and promoting a sense of emotional security for young children by providing support for social inclusion. Constructing support to promote academic inclusion included providing differentiated academic tasks and expectations, accessing resources, providing tutorial support, and using inclusive language. Constructing behavioural support included teachers intervening to provide behavioural guidance, and encouraging children to manage their own behaviour.

Emotional support.

The overwhelming majority of participants (20 out of 21, 95 percent) spoke about constructing emotional support for young children. Participants revealed that emotional assistance was the most important type of help they could provide young children. They considered emotional support vital to promote wellbeing and academic progress. This interview participant explained:

Probably the biggest support we’ve offered him at school is just that emotional support...as opposed to the academic progress...to me as a teacher making sure that the child’s coping and surviving at school and things like that is more important (IP: 9).

Another participant suggested that constructing emotional support for young children took priority over academic work. She suggested that an anxious, stressed child may experience difficulty learning. She explained, in these instances, that she
would change approach with this child, constructing emotional support by making young children feel safe and secure. She explained:

I don’t think they can learn particularly. I think a highly anxious child that is worried about things; I don’t think they really take it in. Then you’ve really got to change tack with them and...try and make them feel safe and secure and happy at school and almost forget about the learning or pushing them too much there (IP: 14).

Constructing emotional support for young children included providing counselling, providing a supportive environment, promoting self-esteem, and social inclusion. The majority of participants (16 out of 21, 76 percent) spoke of engaging in incidental counselling sessions with young children about their family circumstance. They referred to these counselling sessions as having talks with children “on a one to one situation” (IP: 7). One interview participant revealed that, during these private conversations, the teacher may ask, “Is everything okay at home?” (IP: 7). Another teacher explained her approaches to young children:

Sometimes if there has been a problem, I will make an effort to keep that child in at playtime or lunchtime, just to have a talk with them...to see if there’s anything that I can do to help them with how they’re feeling (IP: 12).

Interview participants spoke about talking with children to help them make positive adjustments to their family circumstance. One participant spoke about teachers needing to be “a good listener and to be reassuring and to assist them through the difficulties that they have” (IP: 5). Another participant spoke about “giving them coping skills” (IP: 10). In the following excerpt, this participant talked about a specific strategy she used with young children to build resilience. She explained, “I used to tell them...put on your shield. You know when they are getting
hurt, put on a shield and...let it hit your shield, then go off, and do not take it on board” (IP: 7).

Many participants (9 out of 21, 43 percent) spoke of actively referring young children for counselling by others such as a student welfare coordinator and teacher aides. The role of the student welfare coordinator is to oversee all aspects of welfare of students. In many Victorian government schools, these specialist teachers work with individual children, small groups of children, and are a resource person for classroom teachers. In this study, participants spoke of student welfare coordinators forging positive relationships with young children, engaging in incidental talks as well as formal instruction. In the following excerpt, the student welfare coordinator is instrumental in forming a positive relationship:

Most schools...have a welfare person that takes care of children...just sitting down and having lunch with that child once a week. Or just having a chat or being available if that person needed someone during the day or whatever reason or needed not to be out in the yard (IP: 17).

The student welfare coordinator may also discuss emotions the young child might be experiencing regarding their parents’ separation or divorce and provide reassurance to young children that these emotions are normal. This participant explained:

We have a welfare officer at school and she has worked with him. Basically she's done just lots of conversations with him...[about] being able to identify those emotions, and things that he’s going through, and just the simple stuff like about asking him how he’s feeling, and talking about that it’s okay to be upset (IP: 9).
In other instances, the student welfare coordinator provided specific formal instruction with social skills, as well as dealing with stress and trauma. One interview participant explained the student welfare coordinator engaged in “some extra special targeted work on getting along skills, communication skills, and talking about catastrophe scales” (IP: 10).

Participant teachers spoke of involving teacher aides such as integration aides to support young children emotionally. In the following instance, the integration aide helped the child to settle into school. She explained:

At school, we’ve just really focused more on supporting him emotionally...We’ve organised for one of our integration aides [to have] breakfast with him a few mornings a week...to help him settle in the mornings (IP: 9).

Many interview participants (14 out of 21, 67 percent) spoke about creating a supportive school environment. Interview participants suggested that creating a supportive environment was an ongoing activity, as opposed to a once-off action. Participants spoke about openness: “Creating that sort of community environment where children aren’t feeling fearful of telling you something private” (IP: 4). They described schools as a place where children can feel safe and secure to confide in their teacher at times when they needed emotional support. Teachers promoted schools as safe and secure places by creating and maintaining positive relationships with children and their parents through maintaining open communication, as well as maintaining consistency with routines, rules, and expectations.

In promoting open communication, teachers welcomed young children coming to them to talk about things. One participant explained that she “would give them [children] the opportunity to talk about that if they felt like it” (IP: 4). Another
participant displayed personal care and interest for young children and their family context. She explained:

We have a great relationship because we enjoy being with each other. We talk to each other...We have a really strong communication. I think that’s important that they know that I care for them and that I’m interested in what they do and how they do things (IP: 12).

Interview participants emphasised the school routine, rules, and expectations, and highlighted consistency as features that can help children feel safe and secure at school. One participant explained, “Children have to feel secure...You’ve got to keep everything as it was and fairly...structured for the child...that they can rely on this...and this isn’t changing” (IP: 14). Another interview participant explained her observation of the link between emotional security and consistent routine, rules, and expectations for young children when there is turmoil at home. She explained, “Often with these kids, turmoil that’s happening at home...when they come to school, that’s the only consistency and continuity [in their lives]...So it’s really important that you still keep that in place” (IP: 6). Maintaining consistency, for this teacher, involved not letting go of standards, which she considered would maintain normality for the child. She explained:

It is just keeping everything at school normal and very much in routine...that’s one stable part of their life...you keep the same expectations at school. You don’t let those children get away with things...just because of their circumstance, you adjust where you need to but you keep things as normal as possible and expect their behaviour and things to still be...up to the same standard. They [children] actually look for that...you find that that’s their one stable influence” (IP: 6).
Some interview participants (7 out of 21, 33 percent) spoke about “boosting their [young children’s] confidence and self-esteem” (IP: 15) as a form of emotional support. Participants spoke about their specific actions. One interview participant said, “You’ve got to encourage and give them good positive feedback” (IP: 1) to promote young children’s self-esteem and improve their sense of self-worth. Other interview participants spoke about giving some young children extra jobs to do for the teacher. Teachers explained that young children “think that’s marvellous” (IP: 17). This participant explained that giving young children extra jobs was “a very easy way to massage a child’s...self-esteem” (IP: 17). In a similar way, another interview participant explained that giving young children extra jobs helped them “to feel special,” [to] increase his self-esteem” (IP: 2). She explained that she would “go through the roll and give everybody a turn, but I’d probably give him a couple more than the others” (IP: 2). Other participants provided explicit teaching episodes to support young children’s emotional wellbeing such as games where all children can feel they belong in the class group. This participant described such activities with a social-emotional learning focus specifically designed to promote young children’s self-esteem and help them understand their feelings:

Involving the children to belong...interaction through games...what makes you happy? What makes you sad? What makes you angry – grumpy...? Something that helps that child build their esteem and it’s okay to be happy, it’s okay to be sad, it’s okay to talk about things (IP: 8).

Another action of teachers providing emotional support was the promotion of social inclusion. Some interview participants (5 out of 21, 24 percent) spoke about providing additional experiences and intervention to support young children socially
with a selection of supportive peers, peer group acceptance and maintenance of positive peer interactions.

One participant came to realise that a young child did not have many opportunities for social interaction with other children outside of kindergarten because of their family circumstance. The teacher explained her awareness that the family was “very isolated” (IP: 8). As a result, the teacher presumed that there was not “a lot of social interaction happen[ing] outside of kindergarten” (IP: 8). Therefore, the teacher provided additional experiences to promote socialisation during their time at kindergarten to “make sure that [socialisation] happens inside” (IP: 8).

Interview participants spoke about intervening with young children’s choice of friends. One participant spoke about guiding children towards groups of children whom she thought would be supportive and could be a positive influence. She explained, “I try and steer him towards the kids who’ll keep him in their group. Whereas he’s been leaning towards those who are cool, but they’re not good friends” (IP: 13).

Interview participants spoke about monitoring young children to ensure that they were included in social groups, both in the classroom and during playtime. This participant explained that she would ensure “that they’re included in groups; that you make sure at play time that they’re playing and playing with their friends” (IP: 14).

Some interview participants (5 out of 21, 24 percent) spoke of their consciousness to use inclusive language. This participant showed that she was aware of the variety of family constellations for the children in her class. She said that she would use “inclusive language, so it’s not always go home and ask your mum” (IP: 3).
Summary of emotional support.

The pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers in this study focussed primarily on constructing emotional support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers engaged in a range of pedagogical practices to construct emotional support for children to accommodate their personal characteristics and family circumstances. Practices included providing counselling, constructing a supportive school environment, promoting self-esteem, promoting social inclusion, and using inclusive language.

Academic support.

An overwhelming majority (19 out of 21, 90 percent) of interview participants spoke about constructing academic support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. They spoke about differentiating academic tasks and expectations, accessing resources, and making provision for tutorial support.

Many interview participants (12 out of 21, 57 percent) spoke of differentiating academic tasks and expectations; that is, designing specific activities and modifying expectations to make accommodations for particular children. One teacher spoke about identifying specific objectives for particular children. She provided an activity to address the specific objective and then “directed children to those activities...if I’ve got a specific objective that I want to follow through” (IP: 8). Teachers spoke about having different academic expectations for particular children. One participant said that, at times, she has avoided “insisting a piece of work be done” (IP: 17) by particular children. Another teacher also spoke about reducing her expectations for the amount of work young children completed during a session at school. She explained:
Say they were doing a writing piece and they were not getting a lot done...for whatever reason, tired or whatever. I guess you let them off, you just say look, get to the – do the next stage, try and keep on to them, but don’t expect that they’re going to do as good as what they’ve got done before (IP: 7).

Yet another participant explained that she would “give them a little bit of leeway” (IP: 11). This participant, however, made the point that she would “still expect them to get some work done and not just give them a free pass because of stuff that’s going on at home” (IP: 11), thus maintaining parity with her usual class expectations.

While participants acknowledged that they aimed to maintain consistency, they realised that they needed to consider individual family circumstances when making provision for young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Participants provided young children with extra time to complete class tasks and to complete homework at school. One participant explained that she would “avoid hurrying them along” (IP: 17). Others explained:

Although we try to treat everyone equally, you do have to look at individual circumstances...and give the child time in class to do things, at recess, lunch time, that sort of thing” (IP: 4).

You can say to them well, did you have time to do it and if you didn’t well, we’ll give you some time at school if you get your work finished early or if you want to do it at playtime...You make some allowances like that” (IP: 6).

Participants in the above excerpts gave consideration to individual characteristics of children and their family circumstance to differentiate academic tasks and expectations when required to make accommodations.
Some interview participants (8 out of 21, 38 percent) spoke about providing access to resources to ensure young children were not excluded from educational activities because of their family circumstances. Two schools had a welfare budget to purchase breakfast or lunch items. Participating teachers from the school explained:

We always had a bit of a welfare budget and we’d... make sure they had food. We had a little stock of things in the cupboard in the staffroom so we had breakfast cereals and enough to make lunches and some muesli bars and some fruit and things like that (IP: 18).

The school has fruit bowls in every area...we have a breakfast program on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Any other day there’s [teacher] aides in the staff room waiting for teachers to send these children who have come to school without food...you can’t teach a child that’s got an empty tummy (IP: 19).

The school welfare budget could also be used to help families financially, for example, with payment for school camps, again facilitating student inclusion. Teachers ensured young children were not disadvantaged by not having resources needed for school. Teachers surreptitiously “provided replacements” (IP: 20) when children misplaced resources. One participant explained when a child had left their home reading book at home that she would allow the child to “choose a book from somewhere else to read” on that day (IP: 6). Another participant explained that it was difficult keeping track of resources when young children lived between two households but missing resources could be overlooked by the teacher. She explained, “It’s hard to know where the stuff’s been left. If they’ve got stuff missing, you don’t know whom you’re contacting...I just don’t worry about it” (IP: 3).
Some interview participants (5 out of 21, 24 percent) spoke of providing tutorial support to children or providing access to tutorial support by specialist school personnel, peers, or professional academic tutors. One participant suggested that she was aware that home reading was not occurring for a child who lived between two households. In this instance, the teacher made specific individual provision for the child to “read at school that day” (IP: 14) to ensure the child did not miss out on this important learning. Another participant spoke about having young children practice their reading with her before school began or at other times of the day: “[the child] comes in before school and I’ll help her. When we do reading, I listen to the weak ones, I try to listen to them all every day” (IP: 21). A different interview participant also spoke of providing specific children with “more targeted teaching time” (IP: 10) with the teacher during literacy block.

**Summary of academic support.**

An overwhelming majority of participants provided academic support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Academic support was individualised to accommodate for individual characteristics of children and their family circumstance. Types of academic support included differentiating academic tasks and expectations, accessing resources, and providing tutorial support.

**Behavioural support.**

In addition to emotional and academic support, teachers in this study also provided behavioural support. Many interview participants (10 out of 21, 48 percent) mentioned providing support to correct children’s behaviour. Eight interview participants (38 percent) spoke about providing guidance to children’s with managing their behaviour, while three participants (14 percent) spoke about supporting young children to manage their own behaviour.
Teachers were very clear in stating that young children experiencing parental separation or divorce may experience difficulty managing their own playground and classroom behaviour. To assist, teachers guided their behaviour. Participants referred to some children being constantly “supervised in the playground if he goes out, all the time” (IP: 16), with the aim of avoiding an incident in the playground. Another participant also spoke of constant supervision in the playground. With one specific child, she explained that a teacher needed:

To be with him all the time out in the yard. He can’t play on his own. We have a passive play area that we’ve set up for some children who can’t behave socially, acceptably in the yards...He goes into that area sometimes, or he walks around with the yard duty teacher sometimes, just to keep an eye on him (IP: 12).

The participant in the above excerpt, however, was also critical of this approach. She suggested that interventions such as these were put into place to protect other children but had little benefit for children experiencing difficulty managing their own behaviour. She stated emphatically, “it’s not fixing anything. It’s just really stopping anything from happening. It’s not changing his behaviour” (IP: 12).

Participants spoke of talking calmly with young children about their inappropriate behaviour. This participant explained how she would “bring them in [from the playground], calm them, just try and be as normal as possible. You just always talk to them” (IP: 19). Another participant also spoke about talking with children about their behaviour, and providing encouragement and skills for children to manage their own behaviour when confronted with situations. In one instance, this teacher explained that she “spoke to him...about making good decisions” (IP: 1).
While participant teachers exercised some leniency towards young children’s inappropriate behaviour, they also stressed that they were under pressure to maintain consistent behavioural expectations at school. One participant firmly stated, “We’ve got rules here and those rules are for everyone” (IP: 1). This teacher indicated that generally young children were not treated differently because of their family circumstances. Another participant, however, spoke about different sets of rules being put into place for particular children. She explained that “It really is rules for him and rules for the others...They'd be different sort of rules” (IP: 16).

Teachers had also provided scaffolding for children to manage their own behaviour. In the following excerpt, the teacher encouraged this young child to problem solve and make choices to modify their behaviour. She talked about creating “leeway” with behavioural expectations and providing the child with a range of options from which to choose. She explained:

Sometimes I’ll say to them, how do you think we can fix this problem? They might choose... perhaps [to] sit by themselves for a little while...They might actually sit with a different child that they’re not going to talk to as much...we might arrange a time where you’ve got so much time where you can talk while you’re working and now we’ll have some quiet time...So you give them a bit of leeway and give them some options because each child is quite different (IP: 6).

Summary of behavioural support.
A third form of support was behavioural support. Participating teachers suggested that, at times, young children experiencing parental separation and divorce might display adverse externalising and internalising behaviours. Many participants provided behavioural support for these young children. Behavioural support included
guiding children’s behaviour, as well as providing support for children to manage their own behaviour. Behavioural support of teachers was individualised to make accommodations for the individual characteristics and family circumstances of young children.

4.5.3 Teachers forming partnerships.

While teachers relied on their own knowledge, thinking, and actions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, participants also spoke about forming partnerships with parents, other school personnel, and community members when constructing support for young children.

Many interview participants (10 out of 21, 48 percent) spoke of forming partnerships with parents. Participants revealed that often young children’s inappropriate behaviour in the classroom prompted them to make contact with parents. In the following excerpts, these teachers explained that they collaborated with parents to determine what the cause of their concern was. One participant explained, “If...all of a sudden... [the teacher notices] changes in behaviour...that’s when you would get the parents in...Work in collaboration with the parent to try to pinpoint if there is an issue” (IP: 4). This participant spoke of how collaborating with parents gave her additional insights, thus informing her pedagogical practice and work towards a solution to the problem:

I’ll ring the mum straight away and just...say...he’s been involved in some play at playtime that wasn’t appropriate...I just said...what’s going on basically because we really need to know at the school, so we could make allowances at school for different behaviours and, sort of, counsel (IP: 10).
Other teachers also spoke about working together with parents towards a solution to an identified problem. In the following excerpts, these participants spoke of collaborating with parents to manage children’s inappropriate behaviour. They explained:

Usually it’s because of the child’s behaviour in the classroom that you might make contact with the parents – calling a parent in or seeing them when they pick up the child (IP: 17).

I used to ring his mum; I rang their parents...I’d ring and ask for their support and say, so and so had a pretty bad day today, just be prepared for what might come at home (IP: 19).

Participants also spoke of instances when they showed discretion in raising sensitive behavioural matters with parents. In these instances, teachers appeared to have been aware of extreme distress of parents and were conscious not to add to this distress. Participants spoke of managing issues at school in order to protect parents. For example, “We’ll put off ringing the mother and things like that. We'll deal with it a little bit more in-house as opposed to ringing home” (IP: 9).

Only some interview participants (4 out of 21, 19 percent) spoke of forming partnerships with other school personnel to provide additional emotional, academic, and behavioural support for young children and their parents. For example, participants spoke about referring young children to professional psychologists. This participant explained:

We...have the psychologist that comes in and she is on hand. We've actually called her in, she's talked to [the mother and her child], and there are a couple of other children in the school that are similar (IP: 1).
Other school personnel were also valued by teachers as partners in their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Some would assist parents particularly with academic support, by referring young children for academic tutoring. One participant spoke of how she would “organise tutoring... if parents aren’t up to getting homework tasks done” (IP: 4). These actions overlap with those detailed in the previous section, teachers constructing support, which highlighted the roles of specialist school personnel, peers, older children, and professional academic tutors in the provision of academic support.

When teachers had an awareness of the presence of parental stress factors and the impact this was having on particular young children, teachers established partnerships with community organisations to access external sources of support for parents. In these instances, participants offered support to parents and linked them to counselling support services. One participant explained that she had “offer[ed] the parents assistance [and] we have recommended counselling” (IP: 4).

Only three interview participants (14 percent) spoke of forming partnerships with community members and organisations outside of the school to provide emotional and academic support for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. One participant talked about enlisting volunteer mentors from the community to provide individual attention for young children. She explained that one child “had a mentor all year that she meets up with for an hour every week. That mentor chats, talks, plays games, makes things, and makes a special effort with her” (IP: 10). Other participants spoke about community volunteers reading with young children to provide emotional and academic support. One focus group participant explained that “it was really just about the attention for the kid and they knew there was going to be no one at home to read to anyway” (FGP: 2). Focus group
participants referred to particular groups of community volunteers such as the “grandma group” (FP: 2) or “book mates” (FG: 3).

Participants recalled community organisations providing funding for the school to support children in special events such as camps as the following excerpt attests:

We’ve had a summer camp or the Lions Club might come along and say we’ve got some funds for this camp and you can target children and they might be in those situations…and they need perhaps that opportunity, so you might recommend that student in that situation might benefit more (IP: 5).

**Summary of teachers forming partnerships.**

Participant teachers formed partnerships with parents and to a lesser extent, school personnel, and community members and organisations when making accommodations for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The type and role of partnerships teachers formed depended on children’s individual characteristics and family circumstances.

**4.5.4 Summary of major category three: Teacher action.**

This section has described teachers’ action when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers had pragmatic purposes influencing their actions. These purposes were reflected in the key findings in this major category. The key findings showed that teachers constructed emotional, academic, and behavioural support, and formed partnerships with parents, school personnel, and community members and organisations to promote wellbeing and facilitate academic success of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. While participants provided a range of support for young children, they suggested that constructing emotional support for young children was their first priority and that children needed to feel emotionally secure before they could learn.
The actions of teachers for the construction of support and inclusion of young children were varied, as teachers considered the unique characteristics of young children and their family circumstance. The next section details the central category, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making.

4.6 Central Category: Early Childhood Teachers’ Reflexive Pedagogical Decision-Making

4.6.1 Section overview.

As described earlier in section 4.1, the purpose of the study was to explore how early childhood teachers work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. The new theory that emerged from the data is—*early childhood teachers make complex and pragmatic pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce to facilitate learning and wellbeing*. The grounded theory is explained through a set of integrated categories around the central category (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The central category encapsulates the overall main theme of the research, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making, and integrates the study’s three major categories (a) teacher knowledge, (b) teacher thinking, and (c) teacher action, as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

Embedded in this grounded theory is a process of teachers’ decision-making. Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined “process” (p. 87) as the flow of action that occurs in response to events, situations, or problems, that may call for adjustments in interactions. The decision-making process explains how early childhood teachers make reflexive pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The decision-making process
comprises five phases. The five phases are illustrated in Figure 4.6. They relate to teachers:

1. Constructing their knowledge.
2. Applying their knowledge.
3. Applying decision-making schema.
4. Taking action.
5. Monitoring action and evaluating.
Figure 4.6. The central category: Early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making. The study’s major categories have been colour coded—red represents major category one, teacher knowledge; yellow represents major category two, teacher thinking; and green represents major category three, teacher action.

The term phases may imply a sequential or linear process, however, this is not so in this study. Rather, the phases depict an iterative process such that, in all phases, teachers may cycle back and forth to other phases depending on the individual child.
and the situation. Additionally, the process has been presented cyclically as the data suggest that this pedagogical decision-making process is continual. As teachers increase their repertoire of pedagogical practices they constantly develop knowledge, new understandings and ways of thinking which informs new and varied actions (Buehl & Fives, 2009). Each of the five phases in the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process will be described in turn to further illustrate the central category. Vignettes from interview participants 1 and 5 follow the description of the five phases to illustrate the entire reflexive decision-making process in action.

### 4.6.2 Phase one: Constructing their knowledge.

This phase in the teachers’ reflexive decision-making process relates directly to major category one, teacher knowledge. As detailed earlier in section 4.2.2, teachers acquired knowledge of parental separation and divorce from three sources—young children, families, and school and community-based sources. They gained knowledge of the phenomenon through their professional and personal enactive experiences. In particular, they gained knowledge about parental stress factors, the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children, as detailed in section 4.2.3. This phase in the reflexive decision-making process represents the totality of knowledge teachers have constructed from a range of sources pertaining to a variety of situations.

Importantly, individual teachers have constructed idiosyncratic knowledge regarding the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce. Teachers have acquired knowledge largely through informal sources. Teachers idiosyncratic knowledge may be due to teachers having different professional and personal enactive experiences, such as varying lengths of teaching experience (IPs: 13, 20), and professional development opportunities (IPs: 3, 6, 8, 17). Some teachers have
personally experienced separation or divorce (IPs: 4, 14, 20), or the separation or divorce of family or friends (IPs: 11, 14). Other participants had no personal experience with separation or divorce (IPs: 9, 19). The myriad professional and personal life experiences with separation and divorce influenced individual teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon. Teachers’ knowledge may influence their thinking and action, therefore, individual teachers may respond differently in similar circumstances.

4.6.3 Phase two: Applying their knowledge.

In the second phase of reflexive decision-making, teachers applied their constructed knowledge of parental separation and divorce to develop understandings of individual characteristics of children and their family context. The second phase of the reflexive decision-making process relates to major category two, teacher thinking. This phase in the reflective decision-making process is context dependent and situational. That is, teachers focused on the unique characteristics of individual children, their family context, and the family circumstances surrounding parental separation and divorce. Teachers also focused on the specific nature of the situation they were presented with at a moment in time. In this phase, teachers developed understandings of young children’s unique experience with parental separation and divorce. They were alerted to the presence or absence of particular concerns.

In this study, it appeared that participant teachers filtered the knowledge they had constructed in major category one, teacher knowledge, and selected knowledge that related to the situations they were presented. Teachers’ decisions on how to respond are thus based primarily on the individual teachers’ understandings of the unique characteristics of particular children, knowledge of their family context, and the circumstances surrounding particular children’s parents’ separation or divorce.
4.6.4 Phase three: Applying a decision-making schema.

The third phase of reflexive decision-making, applying a decision-making schema, also relates to major category two, teacher thinking. In the third phase, teachers applied decision-making schema to filter their knowledge, this time for deciding on a course of action. In the previous phase, teachers defined their concern (if any) for individual children by developing understandings of the unique characteristics of young children, their family context, the circumstances surrounding parental separation and divorce, and the present situation. In this third phase, teachers continued to access and filter their knowledge, this time with the focus on particular types of thinking for deciding on a course of action to suit the individual and the current situation.

During this phase, teachers applied knowledge acquired from past professional and personal enactive experiences to the current situation. These experiences included both successful and unsuccessful experiences with particular children as well as with other children in similar situations. The knowledge teachers applied to situations in this phase was largely informal and personal, yet it provided the main impetus in coming to a decision. Some participants in this study also referred to formal forms of knowledge. The spoke about: relating professional development sessions (IPs: 8, 17); engaging in their own professional development by reading articles, professional development books, accessing the Internet (IPs: 6, 8); and accessing specialist personnel (IPs: 1, 12).

During this phase, teachers also anticipated the outcomes of particular actions and planned for future events. For example, an action could either exacerbate or remedy a situation (FGP: 5). Teachers considered their knowledge of individual children, the family context, and the nature of the current situation they were
presented with to anticipate the outcomes of particular actions. Many teachers were proactive. They anticipated future situations with particular children.

Applying decision-making schema is a crucial phase in the decision-making process. Data showed how complex, sensitive decisions were made. During this phase, teachers applied decision-making schema to their knowledge to make concrete decisions regarding the most effective action to apply in the current situation with particular young children.

4.6.5 Phase four: Taking action.

The fourth phase in the reflexive decision-making process is taking action. Taking action relates directly to major category three, teacher action, which details the actions of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The action in this phase relates to teachers constructing emotional, academic, and behavioural support for young children, as well as teachers forming partnerships with parents, other school personnel, and community members and organisations to assist in providing support and making accommodations for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Having constructed knowledge, applied this knowledge, and developed decision-making schema for the most effective response, teachers now take action. As described earlier, the actions applied by teachers are the outcome of the previous three phases—constructing knowledge, applying their knowledge, and applying a decision-making schema. The action of teachers centred on constructing social, emotional, and academic support for children. Teachers also formed partnerships with parents, other school personnel, and community members and organisations.
4.6.6 Phase five: Monitoring action and evaluating.

The fifth phase in the reflexive decision making process is monitoring action and evaluating. Monitoring action and evaluating relates directly to major category two, teacher thinking, which describes the type and nature of teacher thinking that informs action. Having taken action, teachers monitor and evaluate the results of the action, whether the action was successful or unsuccessful in achieving the teachers’ goals. During this phase, teachers continue to think reflexively on the situation, applying knowledge of experiences. If the selected action was unsuccessful, teachers may make modifications by cycling back to previous phases and selecting an alternate course of action to trial, anticipating the outcomes. The teacher adds this unsuccessful experience to her repertoire of enactive experiences. If the selected action was successful, the cycle continues as the teacher adds this situation to their repertoire of successful enactive experiences. At this stage, teachers may construct personal informal theories based on their knowledge and their repertoire of past enactive experiences. With an accumulation of informal theories, teachers’ decision-making process may become swift and teachers may appear to take action almost unconsciously. Teachers have referred to this swift, seemingly unconscious action as intuition, or just knowing what to do. The five-phase model of reflexive decision-making of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce is now demonstrated by way of vignettes of individual participants.

4.6.7 Reflexive decision-making in action.

Two teacher vignettes have been chosen to exemplify the reflexive decision-making process. In these scenarios, pseudonyms have been used to refer to the teacher and students to protect their anonymity. These scenarios show how teachers
worked with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to promote wellbeing and learning.

Vignette one: Interview participant 1.

Vignette one illustrates the decision-making process in action of interview participant one, who described the decision-making process in response to her detailed understandings of the family context and the impact parental separation has had on a particular child.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Constructing</td>
<td>Beth spoke about constructing knowledge regarding their knowledge of parental separation and divorce primarily through her professional enactive experiences acquired on the job. She said it is “what I see in the workplace.” She was a keen observer of young children, explaining that she “sees reactions...of children.” She explained her knowledge of the family context and how contact with this child’s father had diminished over time: Joel has spent time with dad...he [dad] always wanted to spend time with this little boy and his older sister. But...he now has another partner and they have another child and another child on the way. So...the telephone calls and the visits where dad spent the time with his children from his first marriage have...taken a turn and he doesn’t devote the same amount of time to Joel and his sister.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beth explained how the stress related to parental absence had affected Joel: “Joel seems to go through a lot of anguish...Just this week...he was absolutely disagreeable...and mum said he’s had a week with dad. Joel was saying things like I’m angry. I’m always making mistakes” (IP: 1).

2. Applying their knowledge

Beth explained her developing understandings about situations she had been presented with when Joel had displayed inappropriate behaviour. She explained that, when Joel reacted, parental separation and divorce was “at the back of my mind...It crosses my mind if he reacts...then I’m thinking...could this be because he’s been at dads?”

Beth spoke about contacting Joel’s mother to investigate further and develop a deeper understanding. She explained:

When something like this happens...if she doesn’t come into school I contact her and I say...Joel has had a bad today. This is what’s happened. She might say, look I’ve been struggling with him all week, or she may say something like he’s just had time with dad, which is what happened this time (IP: 1).
3. Applying
decision-making
schema

In this instance, Beth consulted the schools’ welfare officer for advice on what action to take. Beth also said that it was her “motherly instinct” that informed her thinking through a suitable course of action to take with this particular child. She went on to explain the reasons for her actions. She explained children experiencing parental separation and divorce “more than ever,...even though they’re reactionary, they have to have guidelines and it has to be stable...they all [need to] feel safe and valued but there has to be rules for everyone” (IP: 1).

4. Taking action

With children in general, Beth described the actions she applied over time to make school a safe and a valued place for all children. She said, “Each class has their own rules...made up from the children. The children say what’s important to them, with guidance, and then we have our school rules” (IP: 1).

In the instance described earlier with Joel, Beth spoke of talking to him and reminding him to “make good decisions” (IP: 1). Beth also enlisted the support of colleagues. She explained to other teachers that Joel was “having a bad time” (IP: 1) at home. She explained she would send Joel to show other teachers his good work, anticipating positive outcomes.
5. Monitoring

Beth thought reflexively about her action in response to the situation, and the observed behavioural changes in Joel. Beth explained, “The next day he wasn’t too bad, by the end of the week he was fine” (IP: 1). Beth can now add this experience to her repertoire of successful enactive experiences.

This vignette illustrated the decision-making process of one participant when presented with a problematic situation. This teacher sourced knowledge of the family context by observing behavioural change in the child. Her knowledge of the phenomenon had been acquired from her professional enactive experiences. She developed understandings of the family context, the unique characteristics of the child, and applied intuitive thinking to inform her pedagogical practice. She collaborated with the child’s parents and colleagues to construct support.

**Vignette two: Interview participant 5.**

Vignette two illustrates the decision-making process in action of interview participant 5 who described the process that informed of the positive adjustment of a young child experiencing parental separation and divorce.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Constructing their knowledge</td>
<td>Tim spoke about constructing his knowledge primarily “through experience in schools...never a subject that I’ve done. It’s just through personal experience” (IP: 5). He was an ardent observer of young children. Tim compared the varying responses of children in general who had experienced parental</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Some children “can be cross at a mother or a father” and other children won’t be as “they just get on with it” (IP: 5).

2. Applying their knowledge

Tim discussed his understanding of Isaac’s family context. Isaac’s mother approached Tim and informed him of the separation from her husband. She expressed her concern for Isaac. Tim concluded that Isaac’s mother was “extremely...nervous [and] upset” (IP: 5). Following this initial contact, Isaac’s mother would “ring up and tell [Tim] every time something had happened” (IP: 5). Tim would observe Isaac at school but never noticed any “difference in behaviour or anything...we never saw any indication of anxiety” (IP: 5).

Tim concluded that “school was a place where [Isaac] would not worry.” Tim explained, “I think [Isaac] just had really good friends at school and that was another world and different environment, therefore, he didn’t have to worry about home or things like that” (IP: 5) while at school.

3. Applying a decision-making schema

In this instance, Tim did not need to think through making adjustments with his interactions with Isaac. Tim concluded Isaac had adjusted adequately to his changed family circumstance.
4. **Taking action**  
Tim commented, however, “a couple of times I got him [Isaac] in, because mum would ask me to keep an eye and talk” (IP: 5) to Isaac. In this instance, Tim provided support to Isaac’s mother. Isaac’s mother would telephone regularly and Tim said he would “be a good listener and be reassuring and to assist [her] through the difficulties” (IP: 5). He went on to explain that he was careful “not [to] take sides” (IP: 5) between parents.

5. **Monitoring action and evaluating**  
Tim continued to observe Isaac and to respond by having conversations with him when requested by Isaac’s mother, thus developing ongoing understandings of Isaacs’ experiences with his parents’ separation and divorce.

This vignette demonstrates the decision-making process of a teacher when informed of a child’s parents’ separation. In this instance, the teacher was informed formally by the child’s parent. The parent expressed concern for her child. Through this interaction with the child’s parent and reflecting on professional enactive experiences, this teacher developed understandings of the child’s family context. The teacher observed the child looking for an indication of adverse effects resulting from his parents’ separation. In this instance, the child did not display any adverse effects at school. The teachers’ decision was not to take any action other than continue to monitor the child’s wellbeing, provide a safe and supportive school environment, and offer support for the child’s parent.
4.6.8 Summary of the central category: Early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making.

The reflexive pedagogical decision-making process is a dynamic iterative process that consists of five phases whereby teachers (a) construct their knowledge, (b) apply their knowledge, (c) apply decision-making schema, (d) take action, and (e) monitor and evaluate. The reflexive decision-making process resembles basic instructional cycles whereby teachers observe and collect data, plan learning goals, enact or teach, and assess or evaluate outcomes (Arthur et al., 2012; Dempsey & Arthur-Kelly, 2007). The important difference between this new theory and basic instructional cycles is the emphasis on reflexive thinking components in phase two, applying their knowledge; phase three, applying decision-making schema; and phase five, monitoring and evaluating. While this new theory provides a heuristic guide to teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, there is a focus on individual children and the unique situations that teachers are confronted with on a daily basis. The theory developed in this study may have broader applicability in that it could be applied to teachers’ work with young children with other types of special needs. The decision-making process not only informs teachers’ current work when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, it is instrumental in contributing to their ongoing knowledge construction for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and, perhaps their work with children with other special needs.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the findings uncovered by this study. The findings revealed a process whereby early childhood teachers make complex and pragmatic pedagogical decisions for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to promote wellbeing and facilitate learning. To illustrate this
process, three major categories, (a) teacher knowledge, (b) teacher thinking, and (c) teacher action; and one central category, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making, were presented. The central category illustrated the pedagogical decision-making process of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The three major categories and central category emerged during analysis of 21 semi-structured interviews and one focus group with Victorian early childhood teachers. By using participants’ own words, the researcher’s aim was to build the confidence of readers by accurately representing the reality of the participants and the phenomenon studied. The next chapter contains a discussion, interpretation and evaluation of the findings with reference to the similarities and differences in the relevant bodies of literature.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Overview

As noted in chapter two, separation and divorce has become a part of social life in the Western world, with approximately one million Australian children having one biological parent living elsewhere (ABS, 2012). Children experience parental separation and divorce in different ways and may carry these effects into their classrooms. Findings from this study indicate that there is a need for greater understanding of the pedagogical practices that can promote wellbeing and facilitate children’s progress at school. There is a scarcity of research into what teachers know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

This study has explored teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. It provides much needed qualitative data to assist teachers and school authorities to understand the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children’s learning, and what schools and teachers can do to help. Importantly, this study can provide directions for future teaching and learning for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews and one focus group interview were conducted with early childhood teachers in government schools in regional areas in the state of Victoria, Australia to address the broad research question:

What characterises the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce?

An overarching grounded theory emerged from the data—early childhood teachers make complex and pragmatic pedagogical decisions when working with
young children experiencing parental separation and divorce to facilitate wellbeing and learning. Embedded in this grounded theory is a process that describes early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making, and integrates the study’s three major categories (a) teacher knowledge, (b) teacher thinking, and (c) teacher action, as illustrated earlier and reproduced here in Figure 5.1.

![Figure 5.1](image)

_Figure 5.1. The central category: Early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making. Colour coding identifies the study’s three major categories that are embedded in the central category—red represents major category one, teacher knowledge; yellow represents major category two, teacher thinking; and green represents major category three, teacher action._

Six key findings emerged from this research, as depicted on page 139 in Table 4.1. Three themes that capture the essence of the six key findings are discussed in this chapter. The previous chapter presented the data of this study by organising it into categories to produce a coherent narrative. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this strategy as the story line technique to aid theoretical integration (p. 106). In keeping with a grounded theory approach, the purpose of this chapter is to provide
interpretive insights into the grounded theory and the key findings that emerged from the data. The discussion takes into consideration the literature on teachers’ decision-making, knowledge, thinking and action, which inform the central category and major categories for this study. The implications of these findings are intended to augment the knowledge and thinking of early childhood teachers that inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce and will be discussed in chapter six.

First, the discussion overviews the central category, which depicts early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making process, that is embedded in this new theory. The focus of discussion then moves to three important themes that augment the key findings of this study (a) early childhood teachers’ informal individual knowledge, (b) reflexive thinking, and (c) pragmatic action. These themes reflect the study’s three major categories (a) teacher knowledge, (b) teacher thinking, and (c) teacher action, and relate directly to the central category, early childhood teachers’ reflexive pedagogical decision-making process. The relationships are illustrated here in Figure 5.2.
5.2 Early Childhood Teachers’ Reflexive Pedagogical Decision-Making

The central category of this study revealed a reflexive decision-making process of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This section discusses the grounded theory that emerged from the data and the contribution made by this research to the literature. This new theory comprises of five phases, as discussed in section 4.6 and reproduced in Figure 5.1—(a) constructing their knowledge, (b) applying their knowledge, (c) applying decision-making schema, (d) taking action, and (e) monitoring action and evaluating.
As outlined in chapter 4, these phases described the activities of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers in this study showed that they were, to varying degrees, reflexive practitioners who processed their experiences through reflection into personal knowledge, and then translated that knowledge into practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The visual appearance of this new grounded theory, as depicted in Figure 5.1, resembles that of traditional reflective teaching cycles depicting teachers’ educational decision-making for example, those found in teacher education textbooks by Arthur, Beecher, Death, Docket, and Farmer (2012), and Dempsey and Arthur-Kelly (2007). These cycles typically make provision for teachers to observe and collect data; plan; make provision; take action; and monitor and reflect on their own and children’s intentions, actions, and feelings. This course of action may lead the teacher to revise their pedagogical practice before continuing the process anew. The grounded theory uncovered in this study extends these previous models or theories in two ways. First, it provides clarification for teachers about the important role of reflexive practice. Second, it highlights that teachers’ decisions are content and context specific. Basing teachers’ decisions on specific content and context, as opposed to the provision of more standardised solutions, is warranted in situations involving parental separation and divorce because a focus on the unique needs of individual children required. The grounded theory revealed in this study, therefore, makes a unique contribution to knowledge in the field.

This new theory provides for clarification and distinguishing of teachers’ knowledge of family contexts and the phenomenon of separation and divorce. While various frameworks have been proposed for identifying sources of teacher
knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Shulman, 1987) and types of teacher knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Elbaz, 1983; Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987), these refer to teaching knowledge in general, and are not specific to teachers’ work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. An important theme that emerged from the data is that teachers’ knowledge was informal and individual. This theme is discussed further in section 5.3.

The decision-making process in this study provides a new theory that extends similar reflexive teaching cycles, owing to its specificity to this phenomenon. Its focus on individual children and the unique situations that teachers are confronted with on a daily basis, together with the decision-making process, is content and context specific to this phenomenon. This notion resonates with the work of Archer (2007), who stated a feature of reflexive thinking in general is that it is context dependent. Teachers are faced with the challenge of deciding what to do when there are a number of competing possibilities. They need to make appropriate decisions to suit the individual child’s unique characteristics and the situation. A theoretical framework against which to view teachers’ pedagogical decision-making, in their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce, has not been presented in the literature.

Underpinning reflexive decision-making is teachers’ reflexive thinking. This new theory identifies specific strategies for reflexive thinking, as described in section 4.6—developing understandings, applying experiences, anticipating outcomes, and applying intuition. These strategies are consistent with the notion of reflective practice, as described by Schön (1995). For Schön, reflection involves thinking back on what we have done. Teachers in this study, however, showed they also engaged in critical reflection about their enactive experiences (professional and personal
experiences), an understanding of their experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how they can use that knowledge to inform practice (Stingu, 2012). Data from this study showed that participants applied knowledge from experiences, specifically from their professional and personal enactive experiences. Schön (1995) called this reflection-on-action. Participants also spoke about applying their intuition in an immediate situation in ways similar to what Schön (1995) called reflection-in-action. Further, the data showed participants identified specific types of thinking that assisted their decision-making, what Schön (1995) called reflection-for-action. The new theory offered in this grounded theory study extends Schön’s (1995) framework with an additional reflexive thinking type—developing understandings. Teachers developing understandings is reliant on all the other reflexive thinking types—applying experiences, anticipating outcomes, and applying intuition. Developing understandings by reflexive thinking is an important difference between Schön’s (1995) framework and this new theory. Schön (1995) advocates that teachers reflect internally within themselves about their own thinking and action, whereas data in this study showed teachers reflected in ways that involved consideration of external factors. That is, they considered the causal conditions that may facilitate, interrupt, or prevent teachers’ work such as economic conditions, cultural values, political trends, and social movements, professional and personal enactive experiences, the family context, and the unique characteristics of children.

There are few prior studies describing the ways teachers and schools can help children experiencing parental separation and divorce. None has elucidated a process that teachers may call on in this situation. Findings of some studies described teachers’ source of knowledge and their knowledge of the phenomenon (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). These studies are described further in section
5.3. Results of some studies revealed that teachers reflected on their knowledge to inform practice (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). These studies are described further in section 5.4. The particular actions of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce have been described in other studies (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Lee & Walsh, 2004; Øverland, et al., 2013; Webb & Blond, 1995). Teachers’ pragmatic actions are described further in section 5.5. These studies, however, were not explicit in detailing the specific knowledge of teachers, and how teachers’ thinking informs their practice. Other researchers who claimed teachers applied a strategy or process for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce merely disclosed a listing of pedagogical practices, with little insight into how teachers moved from knowledge to action (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003). One exception was an older study conducted by Webb and Blond (1995), who found teachers’ knowledge and care for individual children caused them to alter their pedagogy and the curriculum to suit each child. Webb and Blond (1995) found teachers engaged in a constant reflective process. The purpose of Webb and Blond’s (1995) study, however, was not specifically about working with children who have experienced parental separation and divorce. The detailed process of teachers’ critical thinking reported in Webb and Blond’s (1995) study was provided by only one teacher, who referred to children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The process of teachers in this new theory goes beyond these previous studies. This current study details the depth and source of teachers’ knowledge, as well as providing insights into what might be considered effective pedagogical practices and decision-making.

Previous research is built on by this study. It details how teachers move from knowledge to action, by identifying reflexive thinking as the link between knowledge
and action or the mechanism by which teachers move from knowledge to action. Major category two, teacher thinking, connects knowledge to action and forms the complete decision-making process. This new theory extends previous studies that also include a reflective element, in that this strategy refers to specific types of reflexive thinking for pragmatic purposes such as developing understanding, applying experiences, anticipating outcomes, and applying intuition. These reflexive thinking types are discussed further in section 5.4.

The new theory generated by the present study is presented in a cyclical format, which is similar to other models of general teaching cycles. First, the cyclical nature of teachers constructing their knowledge, applying their knowledge to inform their pedagogical practice, and monitoring and evaluation of their action suits this theory, as it depicts continuous reflection and knowledge construction. Second, the similarity to traditional teaching cycles such as those proposed by Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, and Farmer (2012), and Dempsey and Arthur-Kelly (2007) makes it easier for teachers to accommodate another new theory. This similar format allows teachers to focus on the new features of this theory; that is, the specific knowledge content of this phenomenon, as detailed in section 2.4, as well as how to make sense of their knowledge through specific reflexive thinking. The new theory extends what is currently known about teachers’ pedagogical decision-making to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. An emphasis has been placed on teachers’ thinking processes, as well as content specific knowledge regarding parental separation and divorce.

The new theory generated in this study describes a dynamic process that can lead teachers through successive cycles of thinking, reflection, and action to facilitate wellbeing and learning of young children experiencing parental separation and
divorce. While this model resembles other teaching cycles, it is more comprehensive. It has an extremely powerful influence on practice as was demonstrated in the rich data for this study. The discussion now turns to a predominant theme: teachers’ informal individual knowledge.

5.3 Teachers’ Informal Individual Knowledge

First, one predominant theme reflects teachers’ informal and idiosyncratic knowledge of parental separation and divorce concerning young children. Findings suggested the inadequacy of teachers’ knowledge to facilitate children’s wellbeing and learning. Frequently, teachers were not formally informed of the family context, mainly sourcing their knowledge informally. Informally acquiring knowledge had ramifications for the construction of teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon, with individual teachers having their own interpretations and constructing their individual meaning of events. While teachers, as a group, displayed substantial knowledge of the phenomenon, knowledge was idiosyncratic. This theme represents key findings one, two, and three, as outlined in Table 4.1.

In section 4.3, data were used to show the absence of evidence-based understandings of the phenomenon and the absence of formal professional knowledge regarding separation and divorce and young children. These findings resonate with the results of other masters and doctoral studies where data has been used to show that teachers have limited formal knowledge of the consequences of parental separation and divorce (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). An underlying theme that emerged strongly throughout the data was that teachers’ knowledge regarding parental separation and divorce was informal and individual. The informal and individual nature of teachers’ knowledge means that their pedagogy in this area lacked a formal evidence base for practice.
It is likely that a lack of teachers’ formal professional knowledge has begun with the inadequacy of educational policies, as was identified in this study in section 2.5 where it was pointed out that specific policies do not exist. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, as represented in Figure 2.1, provides a means by which to understand the relationship between school policy and teaching practice. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory depicts the trickle-down effect of educational policies in the exosystem to influence early childhood teaching practice in the microsystem.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) devised another tool for understanding these effects. They refer to these as the causal conditions from the outer circles of the conditional/consequential matrix, as illustrated in Figure 3.2, which highlight the broader conditions that facilitate, interrupt, or prevent teachers’ work. It is likely the absence of specific detail and clarity in educational policy documents, or the absence of policy altogether, has resulted in an absence of clear guidelines to inform teachers’ work. The absence and limited clarity of educational policy has created a void that individual teachers attempted to fill in various ways, with whatever knowledge they could acquire.

Not one teacher in this study had received formal professional development about separation and divorce. The absence of formal professional development for teachers reflects the inadequacy of educational policies resulting in the absence of detail and clarity of the issues confronted by teachers on a daily basis and pedagogical practices to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This study has provided crucial insights, raising awareness of the issues teachers are confronted with on a daily basis, and providing valuable data to guide educational policy development for dealing with young children.
experiencing parental separation or divorce, including the provision for formal professional development for teachers.

Teachers were confronted with two main issues when constructing their knowledge of parental separation and divorce in relation to young children (a) the absence of formal knowledge of young children’s family context, and (b) the absence of knowledge of the phenomenon. First, teachers were confronted with the absence of formal knowledge of the family context (here meaning teachers being informed directly from a source). Teachers, however, were instrumental in accessing a range of informal sources to acquire knowledge and develop their understandings of young children’s experiences. In her masters research, Ellington (2003) found that teachers were usually aware of individual children’s family context, although, teachers in her study also indicated that they arrived at these conclusions through informal knowledge sources (here meaning through observations or incidental conversations that the teacher needed to interpret to make meaning). Similarly, King (2007) reported in her masters study, that teachers became aware of individual children’s family context through various sources. In King’s (2007) study, teachers sourced knowledge directly from parents as well as sourcing information informally such as hearing about it in the staffroom, from the community, other students, and sometimes the child. These results from Ellington (2003) and King’s (2007) studies indicate the findings of this present study are not isolated, but are related to broader systems where teachers have experienced an absence of formal knowledge. Ellington (2003) and King’s (2007) studies were conducted in America and Canada respectively which indicates the issues for teachers are not restricted by country or geography, signalling informal sourcing of knowledge of teachers is perhaps a broader issue for
early childhood educators. This may be an issue not only presented in Australia, but also extending across international borders.

Second, when teachers identified a young child may be experiencing adverse effects because of parental separation and divorce, they were confronted with an absence of formal knowledge of the phenomenon that they could call on to confidently inform their pedagogical practice. As described in section 4.3, teachers relied on their individual construction of knowledge from informal sources to inform their pedagogical decisions. The absence of formal knowledge of the phenomenon seems to be a common theme of studies investigating teachers’ work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The absence of formal knowledge was also evidenced in Ellington (2003) and King’s (2007) studies where teachers spoke about their knowledge of the impact on children coming from their experience as a teacher. Øverland, Størksen, and Thorsen (2013) also concluded a sample of 33 day-care staff in their study experienced an absence of knowledge of parental separation and divorce to inform their pedagogical practice.

It appears to be assumed that children’s parents would be the most likely to provide the teacher with knowledge of changes in family context that may affect children’s wellbeing and learning. Interestingly, this present study demonstrated this was rarely the case. A number of possible explanations for teachers not being directly informed of the family context by parents include the sensitive nature of the topic and parents’ beliefs of what is important to tell teachers. One participant said that she believed parents were “very private” about their family life (IP: 4). Prior studies conducted in America and Canada that explored parents’ perceptions showed, however, that most parents informed their child’s teacher at the time they were going through separation and divorce (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007). While previous
studies appear to contradict the findings of this study, these earlier studies were focussed on schools’ and teachers’ roles for supporting children experiencing separation and divorce, and parent perceptions formed only a small component of the data set for their studies. Parents maintaining communication with teachers in subsequent months and years following separation and divorce were not mentioned in these prior studies. The perceptions of parents are outside the scope of this present study. These discrepancies, however, raise the issue of further research to investigate the perceptions of parents regarding communication with their children’s teachers following separation and divorce.

Other parents had informed the principal or office staff of changes in family context; however, there seemed to be a lack of information passed on to classroom teachers. Teachers spoke about only learning of these changed family circumstances from office staff when parents requested two copies of report cards. At other times, teachers became aware that principals held knowledge but had not passed this knowledge onto classroom teachers. This study revealed serious gaps between what is important knowledge for classroom teachers to access and issues of privacy for families. It is plausible that when parents have informed the principal or office staff of the change in their family circumstance that this information would be forwarded on to the classroom teacher. The parents may even assume this has been done. This assumption resonates with the findings of other studies that have shown the majority of parents believed it was necessary to keep teachers informed of the changing family context (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007). It is evident that clearer policies and processes are required to ensure teachers have access to and use current knowledge of the family context of young children to inform their teaching practice.
At the school level, all schools had formal procedures linking parents to schools via enrolment forms, and parents completed personal details pro-forma that provided details of the family context. This study found that participant teachers took opportunities to access these documents when they were available. As these documents were primarily for administrative purposes, however, they were not usually readily available to classroom teachers. Similarly, enrolment forms were completed in the office, and in many schools, these were stored securely in the administration building. Classroom teachers did not have ready access to these files and the details included in them. Teachers in King’s (2007) study valued communication with administration staff to assist in constructing support for children. Participants in King’s (2007) study particularly commented that administration staff should pass on information about the family context and children’s experience with separation and divorce if they became aware, suggesting that teachers were aware that knowledge was held by administration staff and not forwarded onto the classroom teacher.

Some schools had formal procedures, such as a teacher completed personal details proforma and a verbal handover, to pass on important information to children’s subsequent teachers. This procedure, however, was not consistent in all schools and teachers had different perceptions of what to include. Teachers needed to make individual interpretations of their knowledge, and what they perceived to be important and relevant to pass on to children’s subsequent teacher. It is not surprising that teachers have made individual interpretations of their knowledge, as teachers do not have formal knowledge of separation and divorce; therefore, their knowledge is idiosyncratic. Many teachers in this present study spoke about only learning about the family context when an issue arose that prompted the teacher to seek further
knowledge from children’s previous teacher. Commentators have reported similar findings where teachers have valued collaborations with children’s previous teachers to source knowledge regarding the family context, as well as other teachers’ experiences with separation and divorce (King, 2007). One teacher in King’s (2007) study valued communication with children’s prior teacher to establish strategies that have worked with particular children. Another teacher in King’s (2007) study valued collaborating with other teachers who have had similar experiences. Teachers in a similar study valued the contribution made by the school counsellor in constructing support for young children experiencing separation and divorce (Cottongim, 2002). Likewise, issues arose when the separation or divorce occurred during the school year. There did not appear to be any official procedure for parents to inform classroom teachers or schools of changes in family context.

Given these shortcomings with teachers’ formal knowledge acquisition, it is not surprising that teachers in this study revealed young children were their primary source of knowledge. Data showed that young children alerted teachers to their parents’ separation and divorce in various ways, by observing changes in the child, sometimes through direct conversations, but often through indirect conversations, drawing teachers’ attention to the change in family circumstance. Teachers’ construction of meaning was primarily reliant on the interpretation of their observations and conversations with young children. There is no research to illuminate this situation, as it relates specifically to children who have experienced parental separation and divorce.

Teachers sourced knowledge of the phenomenon from their professional and personal enactive experiences. It can be assumed that teachers with firsthand personal experience of separation and divorce have greater insights into separation
and divorce, when compared with teachers who had only professional experiences. Participant four suggested that her personal experiences were paramount in developing her understandings of parental separation and divorce. She said, “There’s a lot of things you can’t understand fully until you’ve gone through it yourself,” suggesting that this personal experience has provided her with intimate knowledge of separation and divorce. Teachers in Ellington (2003) and Cottongim’s (2002) studies spoke of their own parents’ separation and divorce as a valuable asset when working with children in similar circumstances.

Other participants in the present study who had not experienced their own separation or divorce had observed the impact that separation and divorce had on family members or friends, as well as having professional experiences with young children at school. Perhaps, as a result, they may likely have moderate insight into the phenomenon. Other participants declared they had no personal experience with separation and divorce and relied solely on their professional experiences to acquire knowledge. It is likely these teachers have the least insight into the phenomenon. Teachers’ knowledge may, to some extent be mitigated by experience if those who have been teaching for many years have had more professional experiences.

As individual teachers have had different enactive experiences, it is likely they have constructed different knowledge of the consequences of parental separation and divorce. The informal nature of knowledge acquisition is likely to be inadequate for teachers to construct reliable and consistent knowledge to inform their pedagogical decisions for working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. For teachers to be able to facilitate wellbeing and learning at school, they need to have consistent formal research based knowledge to call on when making pedagogical decisions (Miller et al., 1999). This present study confirms prior
recommendations made by King (2007) and Luk-Fong (2008, 2011) that teachers need formal training to become aware of the consequences of parental separation on children and how to respond to them.

It is not suggested that informal knowledge is not as valuable as formal knowledge. Theorists of teachers’ knowledge sources refer to a blend of formal and informal sources (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Shulman, 1987). The focus of discussion has been on teachers’ informal knowledge, as the data showed an uneven balance of teacher knowledge regarding parental separation and divorce. Teachers constructing meaning and developing their understanding from a delicate blend of formal and informal knowledge is optimal. This view is supported by theorists who recognise the importance of teachers’ knowledge as a combination of both formal and informal sources of knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009).

Despite the identified gaps in teachers’ formal knowledge, teachers as a group demonstrated quite an extensive range of informal knowledge of the phenomenon as evidenced in section 4.3. Teachers’ extensive knowledge, even though it has been informally sourced, is to be celebrated. Teachers have been very resourceful in accessing the knowledge they have needed to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, albeit largely from practical experiential sources rather than evidence-based sources.

A consequence of the informal acquisition of knowledge was that teachers’ knowledge was inconsistent, incomplete, and inadequate to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers had to interpret policy documents themselves with limited school procedures to guide them. Given that teachers all had different professional and personal experiences, and sourced information in unique ways, these processes are not reliable to inform
teachers’ work. Participants relied heavily on the interpretation of their observations, conversations with children, the product of their collaborations with colleagues, parents, and community members, and interpretation of their enactive experiences when sourcing knowledge regarding parental separation or divorce. Due to the informal nature of knowledge acquisition, early childhood teachers’ knowledge regarding parental separation and divorce is wide and varied.

5.4 Reflexive Thinking

A second theme emerged regarding teachers’ reflexive thinking about their knowledge for the purpose of facilitating wellbeing and learning of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers’ thinking was complex. They engaged in various reflexive thinking types about their knowledge to develop understandings of the unique characteristics and needs of individual young children and their family context. Teachers’ reflexive thinking about their knowledge informed their pedagogical decisions. This theme represents key finding four.

A key difference with this new theory is the provision for detail regarding teachers’ specific thinking processes. In any theory it is not sufficient to simply state that teachers reflect on their knowledge without specific guidance on how to go about this task. The absence of specific instruction of thinking processes to guide teachers is a limitation of various instructional cycles. While many instructional cycles include a phase related to reflection, these cycles fail to instruct teachers on what knowledge to reflect and how to reflect on their knowledge. This new theory extends these previous instructional cycles by providing specific guidance for teachers regarding what knowledge to reflect and how to reflect on their knowledge. Specific instruction for teachers is particularly important concerning this phenomenon and similar phenomenon, particularly where there is an absence of
formal knowledge and teachers’ knowledge is largely sourced informally. This section will focus on teachers’ reflexive thinking types.

The term reflexive thinking has been used deliberately throughout this study as opposed to the term reflection. Reflexive thinking denotes more than just reflecting on knowledge. Reflection involves thinking back on what has been done (Van Manen, 1991), whereas reflexive thinking involves critical reflection about enactive experiences, understanding of these experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how knowledge can be used to inform practice (Stingu, 2012). The term reflexive thinking suggests that teachers reflect on informal knowledge gained through enactive experiences as well as formal knowledge, and their action is informed by their thinking. Teachers’ actions can make the difference in promoting the well-being and learning of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

The review of the research literature showed there is limited research that documents teachers’ thinking to inform the pedagogical practice when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Other studies that have focussed on teachers’ pedagogical practice, also found that teachers reflected on their knowledge to inform practice. For example, Lee and Walsh’s (2004) biographical study focussed on one preschool teacher’s pedagogical practice with children from underprivileged families. This participant described her practice as being informed by her knowledge of individual children’s needs and she suggested she considered the family circumstances of individual children. Øverland, Størksen, and Thorsen’s (2013) study focussed on the viewpoints of day-care staff and identified their actions with children experiencing parental divorce. The majority of day-care staff considered children’s family context when deciding on an action. Similarly, King
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(2007) focussed on teacher action to assist children experiencing parental divorce. Participants in King’s (2007) study indicated that they considered the family context when making pedagogical decisions. None of these studies, however, provided detail of teachers’ thinking processes to inform pedagogical practice. Specific reflexive thinking types that consider the present situation, help teachers develop their understandings, reflect on experiences, and engage in future oriented thinking by anticipating outcomes are detailed with this new theory.

Data showed teachers’ knowledge of young children’s family context, and teachers’ knowledge of the phenomenon of separation and divorce was complex. Teachers’ reflexive thinking about their knowledge was also complex. Throughout the previous section, I stated that, due to the informal nature of teachers’ knowledge, teachers were required to make interpretations of their observations and collaborations with children, parents, school personnel, and community members. Teachers also needed to make interpretations from the scant educational policy in this field. Teachers’ reflexive thinking forms the basis of their interpretations and is the critical link between teacher knowledge and teacher action. Teachers in this study engaged in a range of reflexive thinking processes to construct meaning and inform their pedagogical decisions. In chapter four, these were identified as developing understandings, applying experiences, anticipating outcomes, and applying intuition.

These reflexive thinking types were presented independently in chapter four, however, it is unlikely teachers engaged in these thinking types in isolation or in an orderly manner. Rather, these thinking types are iterative with teachers’ thinking cycling back and forth between each of the reflexive thinking types in the decision-making process. Teachers developed understandings based on their experiences, sought to understand the present situation, and anticipated the outcomes of particular
actions. To anticipate the outcomes of teachers’ actions, teachers reflected on their experiences to inform future pedagogical practice. Applying intuition also required teachers to reflect on their experiences. Together, all this knowledge contributed to teachers making pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

In prior studies, theorists also advocated thinking back on experiences, acting in the moment or intuitively, and future oriented thinking (Archer, 2007; Schön, 1995; Van Manen, 1991). Archer (2007), a theorist in the field of reflexive thinking, made reference to only two of the reflexive thinking types identified in this study, one of which is reliving events and the other is a future oriented type of thinking by imagining what would happen if certain conditions were present or certain action was taken.

The findings of this present study extend on, as well as differ from, the theoretical frameworks of prominent theorists in the field of reflective work. Parallels can be drawn between this present study and Schön’s (1995) theoretical perspective of reflective practice. Schön’s (1995) perspective also involves thinking through an event after it had occurred, that Schön (1995) called reflecting-on-action; reflecting-in-action; and future oriented action, that Schön (1995) called reflecting-for-action. In Schön’s (1995) perspective, however, the teacher does not consider the external social context of the child that may be an underlying cause of the problem. Reflection is internal, within the teacher rather than inclusive of external factors.

This findings of this present study differ from the work of Van Manen (1991), who advocated types of reflection to consider the meanings of experiences. Van Manen (1991) suggests these thinking types are generic and can be applied to a variety of different contexts. He suggests that this type of thinking allows teachers to
approach situations in an organised and prepared way. As discussed earlier, however, parental separation and divorce can be an unpredictable and unsettling time for children and their families, thus making pedagogical decisions at times difficult to organise and prepare. Teachers’ reflexive thinking that informs their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce is individualised to accommodate the unique characteristics of individual children and their families, and are not related to broader research and theory. These reflexive thinking types are content and context specific.

As described in chapter four, some participants also referred to their intuition to inform practice. Teachers who acted intuitively simply knew what to do in certain situations. This has been referred to in nursing research literature as nurses applying their intuition, a process whereby the nurse just seems to know the right thing to do in a given situation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin’s early work was in the field of nursing. Theorists claim intuition does not just happen. Rather, it is the unconscious workings of a prepared mind; that is, a nurse (or teacher) is only intuitive when they have a deep background understanding of the situation (Benner, 1984). Van Manen (1991) called this type of thinking “active or interaction reflection” (p. 512). He noted when working with children, teachers are often required to take immediate action with little time for deliberation. Teachers’ thinking process may still be apparent, however, when teachers make swift or automatic decisions. It is likely teachers’ automatic or intuitive decisions in this study were also reliant on their experiences. Findings showed that participants referred to their personal experiences with separation and divorce, and parenting their own children. Other participants who had many years of teaching experience including being confronted with many situations involving young children experiencing parental
separation and divorce had developed a large repertoire of experiences to call on. It is likely that over their many years of teaching, these teachers had developed their own decision-making process to call on in similar situations. They took action almost immediately and automatically. Van Manen (1991) referred to such practitioners as having “intuitive competence” (p. 514). Schön (1995) referred to this type of thinking as reflection-in-action (p. 239). While participants may have found it difficult to articulate their thinking process, it is likely they have cycled through the phases of the decision-making process, albeit swiftly. Findings in this study appear to support such a claim.

As was described in chapter four, one focus group participant likened her thinking process to a sounding board that you talk through with yourself. This type of thinking reflects what Archer (2007) referred to as reflexivity. Archer (2007) says reflexivity involves internal conversations to talk oneself through a situation to reach decisions by reliving past events, planning and anticipating outcomes, and clarifying understandings. Archer (2003) says internal conversations serve the purpose for matching “options” with “information” (p. 117). In this present study, when teachers apply a decision-making schema in phase three, they match an action with their knowledge of the unique characteristics of the particular child and knowledge of their family circumstance. Wiley (2010) says teachers mull over the possible solutions and talk themselves through the problem and solution, “searching for an action with a particular goal in view” (p. 26).

It was indicated in the findings of this study that reflexive teachers were able to draw on many sources of knowledge, largely informal, and use them to inform their pedagogical practice. All participating teachers were confronted with uncertainties in their everyday work with young children experiencing parental
separation and divorce that required them to contemplate their pedagogical practice. The effectiveness of their pedagogical decisions was linked to their ability to make interpretations of complex events and to apply thinking types that generated alternatives that could lead to an appropriate solution. This findings of this study contribute to the current body of research on reflexive thinking by examining the sources of knowledge and the thinking of early childhood teachers, both of which inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

The findings of this study showed teachers’ actions were informed by their reflexive thinking. Wiley (2004) claimed internal conversation has a purpose, “it has to steer us through the world” (p. 18), or in teachers’ work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, to steer or inform teachers’ decisions to promote the wellbeing of children and facilitate learning. In this study, this is teachers’ pragmatic action, which is practical action to fulfil a purpose.

5.5 Pragmatic Action

A third theme relates to the pragmatic action of teachers, which is linked to an absence of formal knowledge. Teachers had pragmatic purposes for their action, which was to facilitate wellbeing and learning. Their actions were specific to particular situations and to the needs and characteristics of particular children. The actions of teachers focussed on constructing emotional, academic, and behavioural support as well as forming partnerships with parents, colleagues, and community members to also construct support. This theme represents key findings five and six.

It was revealed in the findings that the main purpose of teachers’ actions was to construct support for young children to promote wellbeing and learning. Specifically, teachers identified emotional support for young children primarily, ahead of academic and behavioural support. Teachers provided this support
themselves, as well as forming relationships with others to assist in the construction of support.

The large body of research indicating that parental separation and divorce can adversely affect young children’s behavioural and emotional wellbeing, as well as their academic progress was discussed in the review of the literature, in section 2.4. It was shown in the findings of this study that teachers have taken action to intervene with children during the process of parental separation and divorce. Teachers have constructed support for young children to ensure behavioural, emotional, and academic progress are not compromised.

It was also shown in the research literature, however, that not all children experience adverse effects to separation and divorce and that some children make a positive adjustment. The ability of some children to make adequate adjustment suggested the absence of parental stress factors (parental absence, compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict), and presence of protective factors (individual, family, and extra-familial). The presence or absence of stress and protective factors can influence young children’s response and adaptation to their parents’ separation and divorce (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Young children’s responses are individual and unique; therefore, teachers’ individual action needs to suit each child’s unique characteristics and family circumstances.

Teachers held the strong view that a stressed child cannot learn well. The majority of participants spoke about constructing emotional support for young children because they thought an anxious, stressed child had difficulty learning. Constructing emotional support became the teachers’ priority for supporting children through their changing family circumstances. A review of studies of teachers’ work with these children showed that teachers’ actions also focussed on constructing
emotional support (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Lee & Walsh, 2004), highlighting the important role of attentive teachers and supportive schools. Participants in these prior studies spoke of similar issues to those identified in this present study—teachers maintaining a controlled and predictable environment where children could feel safe and secure (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Lee & Walsh, 2004); having consistent yet flexible expectations (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007); being available for young children to talk, give a hug, giving special, extra attention, being approachable to children (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007); and using inclusive language when talking about families (Ellington, 2003). Participants highlighted the importance of forming partnerships with parents, school counsellors, and community organisations where they would refer children and their parents to for professional counselling and other services when needed (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003).

During times of family change, teachers noticed the emotional upheaval for particular children, but teachers did not place an emphasis on academic achievement. While they acknowledged it was preferable for children to continue to make academic progress, they realised children may not make academic progress until they had begun to make some positive adjustments to their changed family situation. Participants in previous studies said their focus during these times was to support children to succeed (Lee & Walsh, 2004). Like the teachers in this present study, teachers in these previous studies also provided tutoring, and exercised some leeway by providing extra time to complete work or providing alternative activities (Ellington, 2003; King, 2007).

Another type of support that teachers constructed for children in this study was behavioural support. Participants in this study revealed that they provided
opportunities for children to manage their own behaviour, as well as teachers providing guidance to correct inappropriate behaviour. This finding resonates with previous studies. Participants in Lee and Walsh’s (2004) study intervened to correct inappropriate behaviour as well as giving children choices to manage their own behaviour. Participants in Cottongim’s (2002) and King’s (2007) studies spoke about teachers guiding children’s behaviour by encouraging children to make appropriate choices. Similar to the participants in this present study, participants of prior studies also spoke of being lenient (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007), adjusting expectations, and forming partnerships with parents to collaboratively manage children’s inappropriate behaviour (King, 2007).

These findings highlight the important role of teachers for making provision for protective factors, as described in Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework in section 2.7.1. During constant comparative analysis, Amato’s (2000a) framework emerged as a useful tool with which to understand and integrate the new theory. Commentators who apply Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework recognise the process of divorce can be a stressful event for children and their families. Through this framework protective factors are promoted to buffer the stress factors for children and their families to enable them to make a positive adjustment to their changed family circumstances. Figure 5.2 illustrates an adaptation of Amato’s (2000a) divorce-stress-adjustment framework to show how data from the teachers in this grounded theory study maps onto this framework.
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Data from participants in this study showed teachers considered divorce to be a process that encompassed events leading up to the actual separation and divorce, as well as the events following. Data regarding participants’ knowledge of parental stress factors, and the impact of separation and divorce were compared with recent research literature. This comparison confirmed participants had comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon. Parental stress factors have been represented as what Amato (2000a) calls mediating factors that can affect children’s wellbeing and learning. Corbin and Strauss (2008) referred to these as causal conditions. In this study, these are the causal conditions from the inner circles of the conditional/consequential matrix, illustrated in Figure 3.2, which may have influence on young children’s adjustment to their parents’ separation and divorce. It is teachers’ knowledge of causal conditions that form the basis for their reflexive thinking.

Of particular relevance to teachers’ pragmatic action in this study is what Amato (2000a) refers to as moderators or protective factors. Corbin and Strauss (2008) call them intervening variables. These protective factors intervene with the causal conditions to create a buffer for the identified stress factors and to accommodate for the impact these have on children. In situations of separation and divorce, these are the protective factors, as described in section 2.4.3. In this study, data showed teachers’ actions had influence on individual and family protective factors. Specifically, teachers provided for extra-familial protective factors, facilitating support networks of friends and family, providing a supportive and structured school environment, and providing access to formal support programs. These factors represent several levels of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. It is reasonable to conclude that extensive provision of support for children may be a
Findings showed that teachers not only constructed support for children but also for their families. Teachers and schools attempted to ease the financial burden of parents. The emotional, academic, and behavioural support constructed by teachers can have a positive influence on young children’s temperament, coping skills, and realistic and positive outlook of their family situation.

Constructing support for young children and promoting positive adjustment appeared to be teachers’ primary purpose for action. Adjustment of children to their parents’ separation and divorce has been achieved when the teacher observes a change in a particular child to suggest that the child is functioning in their family, at school, and in the community. Teachers in King’s (2007) study observed academic indicators (academic results, feeling like they have learned something), emotional indicators (happy, feeling cared for, confident, feel safe, enjoy coming to school), and social indicators (more independent, can be themselves, have friends, able to deal with problems and conflicts) in children experiencing parental separation and divorce that suggested children were making successful adjustment.

As stated earlier, Amato’s (2000a) model is useful for understanding the impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. For the purpose of this current study, however, absent from Amato’s (2000a) model is the process of how teachers move from knowledge to action; that is, how teachers make pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This new theory adapts Amato’s (2000a) model, as he intended, to suit specific phenomenon. Greater detail is needed about how teachers’ make pedagogical decisions to provide protective factors for young children experiencing relief to parents, which may contribute to improving the psychological health of parents.
parental separation and divorce. This new theory provides more detail of teachers’ decision-making by making provision for specific reflexive thinking process that inform teachers’ pragmatic action.

5.6 Chapter Summary

During the analysis and interpretation of the data, a new theory emerged that accounted for how teachers acquired knowledge, the nature of teachers’ knowledge concerning parental separation and divorce, and how teachers think about their knowledge to inform their pedagogical decisions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Themes across the key findings showed that teachers’ knowledge was informal and individual. The absence of formal knowledge had implications for teachers making informed pedagogical decisions regarding young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. As a result, teachers had to piece together information they had acquired largely informally to develop their understandings of the family context and young children’s experience with parental separation and divorce.

The new theory that emerged from this study has provided much needed detail on teachers’ reflexive thinking when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. In particular, it provides specific content related to parental separation and divorce as well as specific types of reflexive thinking. There needs to be more work done, however, to address the gaps identified within teachers’ knowledge.

This theory allows teachers to move beyond focussing solely on their actions with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. It places emphasis on the acquisition of teacher knowledge and reflexive thinking to inform their pedagogical practice to promote wellbeing and learning of young children.
Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Chapter Overview

The aim of this study was to explore early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Results from this research address gaps in current knowledge and pedagogical practice for early childhood teachers. Findings of the present study have prompted the development of a theoretical framework in which to view early childhood teachers’ pedagogical decision-making when interacting with these young children. The framework has addressed the diverse and complex day-to-day interactions of teachers with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. This study has provided a springboard for future research in this field.

This sixth and final chapter outlines the contributions of the study in section 6.2. The strengths and limitations of this study are detailed in sections 6.3 and 6.4 respectively. In the ensuing discussion of the significance of the study, emphasis is given to the implications of findings with recommendations for professional practice (section 6.5.1), school level culture and policy (section 6.5.2), and system level policy and procedures (section 6.5.3). Further research opportunities and the generation of possibilities from what has been uncovered in the study are included in section 6.6. The researcher’s final reflections conclude this thesis in section 6.7.

6.2 Contributions of the Study

This research has begun the examination of the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce in Australia. There is an abundance of research examining the
impact of parental separation and divorce on children, both positive and negative. There is a paucity of research, however, on teachers’ work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce; therefore, there were no adequate frameworks to apply. A grounded theory methodology enabled the emergence of a new theory explaining teachers’ reflexive decision-making process for working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The grounded theory of teachers’ reflexive decision-making process accounts for the shared experiences of early childhood teachers who work with these children. Using grounded theory methodology for analysis enhanced the research’s potential originality and contribution.

This study has made a methodological contribution. In applying the rigorous systematic methodology of grounded theory as espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008) for the first time in this field, this study has provided an exemplar from which other studies may be fashioned. This study illustrates essential elements of grounded theory methodology (such as concurrent data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, coding, and memoing). Issues of arriving at theoretical saturation and the need to return to the field late in the research process to gather additional data to ensure saturation were detailed in this study. The unique characteristics of this version of grounded theory (such as drawing on personal experience, considering the various meanings of words, researcher diagrams, storyline technique, and the conditional/consequential matrix) were applied with flexibility, but within the parameters as espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Other researchers can refer to this study to guide their own grounded theory study.
6.3 **Strengths of the Study**

Data were collected through individual open-ended semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview. A strength of using individual interviews and a focus group interview for building grounded theory is the development of new understandings about an under theorised area of pedagogy from the perspectives of the participants. Interviewing individual participants and focus group participants allowed the interviewer to probe participants’ responses in ways that would not have been possible using other forms of data collection such as observation or surveys. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and focus group interview allowed these interactions to take a natural course, within the parameters of the interview and focus group protocol, which is important in grounded theory studies.

A diverse range of participants was involved in this study. The initial stages of recruitment proved problematic, where the proposed methods of recruitment yielded no participants. I resorted to a process of snowballing whereby participants referred other participants. Using this method, I needed to travel further afield than originally anticipated. As a result, data collection occurred in a wide variety of locations in regional Victoria, Australia. The wide range of participants from different schools across the state proved to be a strength of this study as the findings provided insights from a diverse range of individuals from different geographical regions. The test of credibility of this study, however, is the degree to which the results could be applied to teachers in other states and territories in Australia and perhaps even abroad.

Teachers’ professional experience ranged from early career to expert teachers. The range of teacher experience added to the quality of the study, with the results of the study, as confirmed in the focus group interview, resonating with teachers with varying amounts of experience. As a result, a substantive grounded theory that
explained what early childhood teachers know, think, and do with young children experience parental separation and divorce was produced.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The present study is not without limitations. The focus of this study was on teachers of young children who are experiencing their parents’ separation or divorce. This study did not address, however, whether the children had experienced other family transitions for example, the introduction of a stepparent or siblings. It is acknowledged that transitions and stepfamilies may introduce other variables that may affect young children’s wellbeing (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Asking teachers to report on other family transitions was beyond the scope of this study.

At the beginning of the interviews, teachers were asked an open-ended question relating to their basic demographic data. Responses from participants were varied. Some teachers offered personal information; other teachers did not. Therefore, data were not collected that provided comprehensive and accurate demographic data about participating teachers. However, this type of data describing the characteristics of participating teachers may have been valuable to provide further insights into the findings.

Sample size was a limitation in this study. Data were gathered until theoretical saturation, which is “when no new data are emerging” (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 143). In this study, theoretical saturation occurred after twenty-one interviews had been conducted. Grounded theory studies typically involve between 20 and 30 participants, therefore, the study size is congruent with grounded theory studies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
Another limitation of this study is the possible personal bias of the researcher. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend researchers be “self-aware” (p. 303) of their biases and assumptions. As a practitioner in the field, I was cautious not to express my point of view or the points of view of other teachers that had been revealed during data gathering (Stewart et al., 2007). It was inevitable, however, that my enactive experiences would have some impact on analysis of the data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) say the “researcher must walk a fine line between getting into the hearts and minds of respondents, while at the same time keeping enough distance” (pp. 80-81) to safeguard against bias. To address this potential limitation, concepts and their relationships were tested with colleagues at university, and by presenting the preliminary results of the study in a focus group interview for peer and member checking. Opening up the analyses to others helped to safeguard against bias and arrive at the possible understanding of data from multiple perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Despite the identified limitations of the study, the categories that emerged from participants’ responses provided valuable and detailed insights into what teachers know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Based on the findings, this study has provided a new theoretical understanding and much needed starting point for further research in this area.

6.5 Recommendations

Three recommendations in the field of professional practice, school culture, and policy and procedures emerged from the present study.
6.5.1 Recommendation one: Professional practice.

_Provision of professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers regarding the effects of parental separation and divorce on children and their families; and the pedagogical practice of teachers to promote emotional and behavioural wellbeing and to promote learning of children._

With over one million children in Australia living in separated and divorced families (ABS, 2012), schools and teachers should realise the tremendous impact parental separation and divorce can have on young children, and the important role teachers can play in constructing support. It is suggested that teachers be more informed and develop the skills to confidently provide support for these young children. The informal and individual nature of teachers’ knowledge regarding the phenomenon of parental separation or divorce suggests that the knowledge of early childhood teachers as a profession may be inadequate to provide teachers with accurate, comprehensive, and consistent knowledge to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Teachers need to have an understanding of the prevalence of parental separation and divorce (section 2.2), the impact on children and the parental stress factors (sections 2.4.1, 2.4.2), as well as the factors that promote positive adjustment (section 2.4.3) to support wellbeing and learning. While teachers could learn from the teachers in this study, it highlights the inefficiency of knowledge acquisition that has impact on teachers’ decision-making process. What seems to be missing from teachers’ knowledge in this current study is their blending of formal theoretical knowledge with their informal knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Clandinin, 1985; Elbaz, 1983). In phase one of the resulting theory that emerged from the data, when teachers are constructing their knowledge, there needs to be particular care taken to ensure a balance of formal and informal sources.
of knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009) for teachers to access in subsequent phases of this new theory. In particular, attention needs to be given to formal knowledge of the phenomenon, as this is an identified gap in teachers’ knowledge.

Findings showed that teachers applied a range of thinking types to inform their pedagogical decisions; however, there remain wide variations and approaches to teachers’ reflective thinking processes. In practice, teachers’ reflexive thinking is more cyclical than linear; however, this study provides a framework for conceptualising the process for teachers’ reflexive thinking to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, as depicted in Table 6.1. It is recommended to provide teachers guidance with various reflexive thinking types that may help them make sense of their knowledge. The prompting questions in Table 6.1 provide a starting point for this type of internal conversation that teachers could be encouraged to use when presented with an issue. The prompts have been derived from the data provided by participants in this study. It is by no means complete. Nor is it expected teachers will apply each reflexive thinking type each time they are presented with an issue. A thinking tool of this nature can provide a starting point.
### Table 6.1
*Teachers’ Guide to Reflexive Thinking to Inform Pedagogical Practice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflexive thinking type</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
<th>Phase in the decision-making process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Developing understandings | What is the issue?  
What is going on here?  
What sense can I make of the situation?  
Brainstorm possible causes.  
What are the unique characteristics of this particular child and their family context?  
What does the child need right now/longer term? | Phase one:  
Constructing their knowledge |
| Applying experiences | When have I experienced this before? - Another child, my own experience, observation of a colleague?  
What did I/they do then?  
Was the action successful? Why/why not? | Phase two:  
Applying their knowledge |
| Anticipating outcomes | What are the possible consequences of my actions?  
What is my experience of this child?  
Will this action be suited to this particular child, their family circumstance, and this context?  
Why/why not?  
What may happen?  
What may happen if I do not take action?  
What are the alternatives? | Phase two:  
Applying their knowledge |
| Anticipating outcomes (planning) | How can I best accommodate this child’s needs?  
How can I prevent an issue escalating?  
What can I change?  
Whom can I call on to assist? (teacher aide, principal, community members, colleague, parents, peers, older students) | Phase three:  
Applying decision-making schema;  
Phase four: Take action |
| Applying experiences | Were my actions successful?  
Has the issue been addressed satisfactorily?  
What worked well? Why?  
What could be improved? Why? How?  
What else could I have done?  
If this issue arose again, what would I do? – with this child/another child?  
What connections can I draw between this new experience and prior experiences? | Phase five:  
Monitoring action and evaluating |
Reflexive thinking is a personal activity. Archer (2007) notes that reflexivity has personalised meanings derived from an individual’s experiences, similar to the meanings teachers in this study constructed from their enactive experiences. Therefore, it is envisioned that teachers would take prompts from Table 6.1 that suit them personally, the different pedagogical situations they encounter, the unique characteristics of particular children and their family contexts, as well as asking themselves questions additional to those provided. In the column on the left, the reflexive thinking type is nominated. In the column on the right is the relevant phase in the decision-making process. These are included to focus teachers on the thinking type as well as the purpose for their thinking, for example, to develop understandings.

The prompts in Table 6.1 are flexible and can be adapted to address a multitude of scenarios. The prompts are useful when teachers have been presented with challenging issues that require action; however, teachers did not always wait to be presented with an issue before taking action. Participants in this study spoke about times when they acted proactively, based on their experiences. In these instances, teachers took action before an issue arose, thus preventing a situation from escalating. Similar prompts to those outlined in Table 6.1 can guide teachers’ reflexive thinking. In instances where teachers are acting proactively, however, there is greater focus on the reflexive thinking type identified in this study as anticipating outcomes. Teachers may also determine the best action is not to take action.

Table 6.2 provides a summary of the range of pedagogical techniques that have been used and tested by the experience (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers’ actions in Table 6.2 that form the basis for pedagogical practice
have derived from existing research focusing on the individual, family, and extra-familial mediating factors, as detailed in section 2.4.3, as well as formalising the actions of teachers revealed in this study, as detailed in section 4.4. In this Table, pedagogical practices are presented according to the properties and dimensions that emerged in major category three, teacher action. The properties revolve around teachers constructing support for young children—emotional, academic and behavioural. The dimensions of each of these properties provide clues to specific actions teachers can use to construct support and the partnerships they can nurture with others to assist them in constructing support. The practices depicted in Table 6.2 allow for the notion of modifiable protective factors (Pedro-Carroll, 2005) that teachers can influence, such as considering the unique characteristics of children, promoting their coping skills, and encouraging a realistic and positive outlook to their family situation. Modifiable family factors can be supported, such as providing financial support, enabling access to school resources, and collaborating with parents. These concrete actions can assist in promoting positive family relationships. Various support networks are evident such as family, friends, teachers, school, and community organisations to assist teachers in constructing partnerships to build support around young children.
Table 6.2
Pedagogical Practices of Teachers Working with Young Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Support</th>
<th>Academic Support</th>
<th>Behavioural support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Counselling for children and parents</td>
<td>• Differentiated academic tasks and expectations</td>
<td>• Teacher guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Teacher</td>
<td>o Leniency with time and expectations</td>
<td>o Close supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Colleagues – psychologist, welfare teacher, teacher aides</td>
<td>o Providing specific tasks</td>
<td>o Counselling behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Community volunteers</td>
<td>• Accessing resources</td>
<td>o Correcting behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supportive school environment</td>
<td>o Welfare budget - food, camps, excursions</td>
<td>o Leniency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Positive caring relationships with children and parents</td>
<td>o Replacing resources</td>
<td>o Consistent rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Open communication with children and parents</td>
<td>o Donations from community groups</td>
<td>o Collaborate with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Consistent routines, rules and expectations</td>
<td>• Tutorial support</td>
<td>• Children managing their own behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o leniency</td>
<td>o Teacher</td>
<td>o Provide choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promoting self-esteem</td>
<td>o Peer</td>
<td>o Support and encourage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Encouragement</td>
<td>o Older students</td>
<td>o Collaborate with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Positive reinforcement</td>
<td>o Community volunteers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Special jobs</td>
<td>o Professional tutors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>o Focussed teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promoting social inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Intervening with peer groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Supportive peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Maintain peer groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using inclusive language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce
Despite identifying a list of successful pedagogical practices of teachers working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce, it is perhaps timely to caution that teachers should not simply apply them without first developing their understanding of the particular child, their family, and the context through reflexive thinking. It is not sufficient to provide teachers with a set of actions they can take without considering the unique characteristics of children and families. Rather, teachers’ decision-making is a sophisticated contextualised process.

The findings from this study provide a starting point for further research into the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Professional development could also identify support services available in schools and the wider community, and how teachers and parents can access these resources and services. It is to school culture that this discussion now turns.

6.5.2 Recommendation two: School level culture and policy.

*Enhancement of school level culture and policy that focuses on families experiencing parental separation and divorce that encourages and supports partnerships between families, teachers and schools facilitating open communication, shared responsibility and collaboration, mutual respect and support.*

It is recommended to promote leadership in schools that encourage a school culture that is focussed on shaping and maintaining collaborative partnerships between teachers and between teachers and families. Leadership in this context refers to administrative leadership, as well as leadership from specialist school personnel, influential or prominent teachers, or members of the school and wider community.
The enhancement of school culture may lead to the development of a school policy that focuses on parental separation and divorce.

An ecological perspective emphasises the connections between children and their groups and organisations. Relevant to this study is the influence teachers, schools, and families can have on children. Teachers may be able to serve the children in their class and their families if they understand them better. Similarly, families need to understand how they can be a positive influence on their children. The findings of this study indicated that communication between home and school is important, particularly in the event of separation and divorce. Partnerships between families, teachers, and schools can influence the functioning of family units, a recognised priority area of the AIFS in the AIFS research directions 2012-15: Australian families in a rapidly changing world (2012). Prior studies revealed that parents valued collaborations with their children’s teacher and schools (Cottongim, 2002; King, 2007); however, this study revealed that these collaborations were somewhat ad-hoc.

It is recommended that schools establish policies regarding the family-school relationship, based on the principle of partnership between parents and teachers, with particular reference to family circumstances such as parental separation and divorce. Teachers and families need to understand and influence each other to benefit children. A school culture that implies an attitude of shared responsibility and a willingness to collaborate in a context of mutual respect and support where all players are working towards the benefit of the children is suggested.

An extensive search in Australia revealed no school policies relating specifically to parental separation and divorce. The following policy recommendations in Table 6.3 have been adapted from Our Lady of Lourdes...
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce

National School in Ireland (Archer, 2007). This exemplar provides concrete guidelines for parents, teachers, and school personnel. It outlines the aims and responsibilities of staff, and recommendations for parents. A policy such as the one provided can enable shared understandings of the roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers, and school personnel for the benefit of children experiencing parental separation and divorce.
A standard policy regarding separation and divorce might include:

Table 6.3

Sample Separation and Divorce Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Separation and Divorce Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The staff at (School Name) encourages parents experiencing separation and divorce to come and speak confidentially with their teachers or the principal. It is our aim to handle such matters with sensitivity, compassion, and understanding. Our primary concern is for the wellbeing and development of the child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Parents are requested to maintain communication with your child’s teacher, and keep them informed of the family circumstance so teachers can have an understanding and offer support when required.

- When a child spends time in two households, it is requested that the school be provided with both sets of emergency contact numbers.

- It is requested that the school be informed of pick-up arrangements for children. The school needs to be informed of any changes in writing.

- It is school policy to offer the option of separate parent-teacher meetings, if so desired.

- All communication between school and home will be directed to the nominated parent as per the school enrolment form. It is assumed that all communication will be shared between parents. Special requests for separate communication can be accommodated.

- In the absence of a formal custody arrangement, both parents will be treated as equal partners in terms of parenting rights and responsibilities.

- All school staff will endeavour at all times to deal confidentially, sensitively and in a supportive and caring manner with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

- The school and teachers can offer various support (such as emotional, academic, or behavioural support) for children and their families experiencing separation and divorce. Please feel free to discuss the options available.
Importantly, it was shown in this study that teachers were not always privy to sensitive, yet important, information about children’s family context. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers and schools could develop systems to receive relevant information and maintain updated student files when information is received. For example:

- Classroom teachers could receive copies of enrolment forms and updates to personal details pro-forma from office staff. Teachers also need to be informed of verbal communication received by office staff or the principal.
- Teachers could be encouraged to maintain documented anecdotal records of communication from parents. This could include conversations as well as observations.

As these documents contain sensitive and private information they need to be stored securely such as in a locked file in the classroom. It is suggested these documents be viewed and specific details noted at the start of each school year or when a child transfers from another school. To ensure children’s subsequent teacher is informed, these official documents could be updated when new details regarding the family context becomes available. Most school authorities have policies in place regarding privacy and confidentiality. These policies should not prevent teachers from having professional access to important information they need to teach young children and understand their situations to be able to modify their teaching practices.
6.5.3 Recommendation three: System level policy and procedures.

Formalise consistent procedures and guidelines in and across schools to inform teachers and to keep teachers informed of the family context and recent research into the education of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

The overview of education system policies undertaken for this study suggested there was a lack of a systemic perspective, particularly concerning providing teachers with educational policy containing consistent and clear guidelines to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. All teachers in this study revealed that they had not received evidence-based professional development regarding separation and divorce. This study provides strong evidence to suggest the implementation of educational policy development for teachers dealing with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce, including the provision for appropriate formal professional development for teachers. Policy recommendations include:

- Using findings from this study to suggest that policy makers provide for a consistent approach across education systems in Australia to cater for the diverse and complex needs of children and families experiencing separation and divorce. This is especially important in a federated nation such as Australia, as families are mobile and children may move between the states of Australia.

- Current educational policies (as detailed in section 2.5) aimed to provide for the social and emotional needs of students, however, these policies were found to be broad and general. In the light of this study’s findings, I recommend promoting an educational framework that is particularly oriented
to the social and emotional needs of all students through cooperation between school and authorities in the wider community. A prerequisite would be that both the school and the educational system aim at developing children’s qualities and dispositions, promoting acceptance of diversity, respect, and acceptance of different family types, such as single-parent families and joint custody families. The apparent vague and general nature of policies and the lack of teacher reliance on them as a guide (as indicated in the interviews) suggests that policies directed towards teachers could be strengthened to provide explicit guidelines to inform their work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

### 6.6 Further Research

The current study supports the need for continuing research in this area. The primary concern of this research has been to investigate the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers in order to gain a greater understanding of the knowledge and thought processes that inform their pedagogic decisions and actions when working with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Mention has been made of the various properties and dimensions to explain the core category and three major categories that form the basis of the grounded theory whereby early childhood teachers make complex and pragmatic pedagogic choices when making provision for and interacting with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Although this study has provided the starting point for more thoroughly examining early childhood teachers’ pedagogic decisions concerning young children experiencing parental separation or divorce, further research is needed.
This research investigated teachers’ pedagogical practice for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Building onto this evidence base, other questions may be asked:

- What do children have to say about their parents’ separation or divorce and how has it affected them and their experiences at school? Are children’s perspectives consistent with the views of their teachers?
- What are parents’ perceptions of communication with teachers and schools on sensitive family issues such as parental separation and divorce?
- What are the effects of regular counselling through the school, for children affected by divorce? (Is it working?)
- How does teachers’ experience with separation and divorce influence their pedagogical decisions? Is there an educational advantage for children to have teachers who have been separated or divorced or who were also children of parental separation or divorce?
- Does the extent and nature of teachers’ professional experience influence their pedagogical decisions?

6.7 Researcher’s Final Reflections

It is timely to reflect on the importance of this study. With one in two marriages in Australia ending in divorce and the incidence of parental separation, it is estimated that over one million children under the age of 18 in Australia may be experiencing the stress and impact of parental separation and divorce (ABS, 2012). Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to make a difference in the lives of young children by constructing support for young children experiencing parental separation or divorce to promote learning and wellbeing. This study has been
instrumental in formalising the important pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers. This is just the beginning of investigation in this field. I truly hope that early childhood teachers and researchers gain insights from this study and continue to add to this initial work towards the common aim of making a difference for young children and their families.
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Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce


Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce
Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Primary Principals

Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices: What they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

INVITATION TO PRIMARY PRINCIPSALS (Recruitment)

Date

[Principal's name]
Principal
[School name]
[School postal address]
[Suburb, State, postcode]

Dear [Principal's name]

I am writing to ask your help in a study of teaching practices with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. This study is undertaken as part of a Doctoral research project. This letter describes the research project and warmly invites you to participate in the study by allowing me to conduct this research with teachers from your school. Please take a moment to read this information before deciding whether to participate. When you have decided, please return your response to me in the envelope or via email as soon as possible.

The project has received ethical clearance from the Queensland University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee [Approval Number 1000000668] and has approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria [File Number 2010_000749].

Description
The purpose of this project is to identify and understand teaching practices with children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Parental separation or divorce has become a part of social life in the Western world. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) estimated 22 percent of all children under the age of 18 had a biological parent living elsewhere, presumably as a result of parental separation or divorce. This amounts to approximately one million Australian children. Therefore, in an early childhood class of twenty-four young children, potentially one in five children may be experiencing parental separation or divorce and its various effects and may carry these effects into their classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be greater understanding of the pedagogical practices that can facilitate these children’s progress at school.

This is an exploratory study, designed to provide information, which might form the basis of later research in this area. The primary source of information for the project will be material from interviews conducted with teachers of young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.
I am requesting the assistance of teachers from your school because there is very little information on this topic as a basis for school policies or procedures. There is evidence that teachers’ work actively and supportively with students from a wide range of family backgrounds, but professionals are doing this in the absence of research evidence. Professional input from teachers in the field will provide valuable insight into teaching practices with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

**Participation**

Your primary school was randomly selected to be involved in this study. Your school’s involvement in this project is voluntary.

If you agree for your school to participate, participation of teachers will involve an individual interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, conducted at school, outside school hours at a time and place convenient for them. Questions will include asking them to talk about a day or a particular episode with a child experiencing parental separation or divorce. With their permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. Participating teachers will be provided with a transcript of their interview and will be invited to make additions or comments during follow-up contact with myself and through optional journal writing. Later in the study, participants will be invited to attend a focus group where they will be able to view a collation of preliminary results of the study and make additions or comments.

Participation in this project is voluntary. Teachers can withdraw from participation at any time during the project without comment or penalty.

**Expected benefits**

It is not expected that this project will benefit individual teachers directly. However, it is expected that this project may benefit the teaching profession and the way early childhood teachers interact with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce in the future. At the conclusion of the project, a report of the findings will be provided to the Principal of participating schools, Regional Directors of participating regions, and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria.

**Risks**

There are no risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with teachers’ participation in this project. However, during the interview, teachers will be asked questions regarding their experiences with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Sometimes talking about family experiences may cause people to feel some distress. There are suitable plans in place to support participants. Counselling services are available from the following:

- QUT provides for limited free counselling for research participants of QUT projects, who may experience some distress as a result of the participation in the research. Should participants wish to access this service please contact the clinic Receptionist of the QUT Psychology Clinic on (07) 3138 0999 indicating that you are a research participant.
- The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providing a counselling service for employees. The service is provided by Converge International and can be contacted on 1800 337 068. Further details are available on the website [http://www.education.vic.gov.au/hr/ohs/about/EAP.htm](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/hr/ohs/about/EAP.htm).


**Confidentiality**
All comments and responses will be treated confidentially. The names of individual persons are not required in any of the responses. The teachers’ identity and the identity of your school will be protected in any publication of the findings by use of pseudonyms or fictitious names for participants and school sites. These will be inserted at the point of transcription so that real names will never appear on raw/original data files. Audiotapes will be destroyed after transcription. De-identified data will be accessible to academic members of the research team. The data may be used for research and educational purposes only and will be stored for five years, then destroyed.

**Consent to Participate**
I ask that you return the response form (attached) by post or email to confirm your decision. A return envelope with paid postage is attached for your convenience.

**Concerns / complaints regarding the conduct of the project**
QUT is committed to researcher integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Officer on (07) 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The Research Ethics Officer is not connected with the research project and can deal with your concern in an impartial manner.

Please find attached a copy of the following for your information:
- DEECD letter of approval;
- Ethical clearance from QUT Human Research Ethics Committee;
- *Application to Conduct Research in Schools* pro forma as submitted to the Department;
- Recruitment flyer;
- Participant Information sheet and consent form; and
- Interview protocol.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this project further or to address your staff about the project. I can be contacted by:
Phone  0416 945 180
Email  linda.mahony@student.qut.edu.au
Mail  Box 89
      Learmonth VIC 3352

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to receiving your response.
Yours sincerely

Linda Mahony
Doctoral Student
Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce

Queensland University of Technology

The research team are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mrs Linda Mahony</th>
<th>Dr Kerryann Walsh</th>
<th>Assoc Prof Joanne Brownlee</th>
<th>Dr Anne Petriwskyj</th>
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<tr>
<td>Doctoral Candidate</td>
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<td>(07)3138 3148</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:linda.mahony@student.qut.edu.au">linda.mahony@student.qut.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:k.walsh@qut.edu.au">k.walsh@qut.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:j.brownlee@qut.edu.au">j.brownlee@qut.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:a.petriwskyj@qut.edu.au">a.petriwskyj@qut.edu.au</a></td>
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Appendix B: Initial Interview Protocol

Project: Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices: what they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

Time of Interview: __________ (at convenience of participant outside of school hours)

Date: ______________________________

Interview location: Quiet meeting area at the participants’ school such as the teacher’s classroom, an office in the administration building or the school library

Interview equipment: Audio recording device

Interviewer: Linda Mahony

Interviewee: ________________________________

School: ________________________________

Opening statements and reminders

Thank you for offering to share your thoughts about your experiences with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. I would like to remind you that I am interviewing today as a QUT student, so that any discussion we have will remain confidential. I will not be using your name in any discussion, documentation or publication. I would like to audio-record our discussion, and will give you a transcript so that you can confirm it and offer any comments. Are you happy for me to record, or would you rather I just took notes as we speak?

☐ (Have participant sign consent form)

☐ (Test and turn on audio recorders)

Demographic information:

1. How many years teaching experience do you have?
Grand tour question:

1. Could you tell me about a day or a particular episode with child (of separation or divorce)?
   I want to hear your story of what you know, think, and do with child.
   At the end, if there is anything else I want to know, I will ask additional questions, but for now just talk freely.
Backup questions:

2. *How do you find out about the separation or divorce of a child’s parents?*
   a. *Does the child talk to you about their parents’ separation, divorce, or related topics?*
   b. *Do the parents inform you of their separation or divorce?*
   c. *Do other school personnel inform you?*
   d. *Are there times where you are not informed?*

3. *What do you know about parental separation or divorce concerning young children?*
   a. *Where have you learnt about parental separation or divorce? (personal and or professional experience, professional reading)*
   b. *What specific training have you received to help you when interacting with children who are or have experienced parental separation or divorce?*

4. *How does this knowledge influence your thoughts and interactions with the child?*

5. *Do you intervene or adjust your practice when interacting with children experiencing parental separation or divorce?*
   a. *Why/why not?*
   b. *How?*

Concluding Comments

I would like to thank you for sharing your thoughts with me today.

I note in particular your ideas about.................

Is there anything you would like to add before we finish?

I will be organising a transcript of our discussion, and would appreciate if you would confirm the accuracy and offer any other comments you would like to at that stage.
I will leave this journal with you to record any additional thoughts.
Would you prefer I phoned you or emailed you next week to follow up?

Thank you again for your professional support and comments.
Appendix C: Final Interview Protocol

Project: Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices: what they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

Time of Interview: __________ (at convenience of participant outside of school hours)

Date: ________________________________

Interview location: Quiet meeting area at the participants’ school such as the teacher’s classroom, an office in the administration building or the school library

Interview equipment: Audio recording device

Interviewer: Linda Mahony

Interviewee: ________________________________

School: ________________________________

Opening statements and reminders:
Thank you for offering to share your experiences with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

(Orienting)
I am interested in this topic because it is estimated that 1 in 5 children may be experiencing parental separation or divorce. As an early childhood teacher myself, I have worked with many children in this situation and I noticed that there is not much available to help us; very little has been formally documented in educational research. My goal in this project is to talk with early childhood teachers who have interacted with young children from separated or divorced families, to gather their knowledge and experiences to develop a kind of knowledge base that can be shared with others.

I would like to remind you that I am interviewing today as a QUT student, so that any discussion we have will remain confidential. I will not be using your name in any discussion, documentation or publication.

I’ve got a list of questions here that I ask everybody, that reminds me so that I don’t miss anything out (Gillham, 2005).

I would like to audio-record our discussion, and will give you a transcript so that you can confirm and offer any comments. Are you happy for me to record, or would you rather I just took notes as we speak?

☐ (Have participant sign consent form)

☐ (Test and turn on audio recorders)
Demographic information:

1. Tell me about your teaching experience - how many years teaching have you been teaching and where have you taught?

Grand tour question:

2. Could you tell me about a day or a particular episode that happened with a child or children (of separation or divorce)?
   I want to hear about your experiences with these children.
   At the end, if there is anything else I want to know, I will ask some more questions, but for now just talk freely.

Probing questions:

- Can you give me another example?...in the classroom...in the playground?
- I noticed you said...can you tell me more about...?
- Tell me what you mean by...
- What were you thinking about at the time?
- I wonder if there is anything else. (depth)
- Other participants are saying...(focus)
- I don’t quite understand that. Can you spell it out for me? (clarification)
- How did you cope with that?
- What makes you say that? (justification)
- Give me an example
- Tell me a bit more about...
- What happened after that?
Backup questions:

3. *I am interested in how teachers come to know about children’s family situation concerning parental separation or divorce. How do you find out about the separation or divorce of a child’s parents?*

   Prompts:
   
   a. Does the child talk to you about their parents’ separation, divorce, or related topics?
   b. Do the parents inform you of their separation or divorce?
   c. Do other school personnel inform you?
   d. Are there times where you are not informed?

4. *I am interested in what you know about parental separation or divorce. Where does your knowledge about parental separation or divorce come from?*

   Prompts:
   
   a. Where have you found out about parental separation or divorce? (personal and or professional experience, professional reading)
   b. Have you had any specific training to interact with children who are or have experienced parental separation or divorce?
   c. Thinking back, what kinds of training or PD would have helped?
   d. How would you describe the impact parental separation or divorce has on young children?

5. *Can you talk a little about your understanding of the effect of parental separation or divorce on young children?*

6. *Can you tell me how your knowledge about parental separation or divorce influences your interactions with the child?*

7. *Thinking back over your experiences of working with children who have experienced parental separation or divorce, tell me about any adjustments you have made to your teaching practice when interacting with these children.*

   Prompts:
   
   a. What did you do? (specific example) Why do you think you did it that way?
   b. What were you thinking at the time? (reasons)
   c. How do you think you knew to do these things?

*Other:* (Charmaz, 2003, pp. 315-316)

Tell me about what happened or how you came to.....
When, if at all did you first experience or notice...
What was it like? What did you think then?
Could you describe the events that led up to...?
What contributed to...?
How would you describe how you viewed _____ before ______ happened?
What if anything, did you know about...?
Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you learned about...
What happened next?
Tell me about how you learned to handle...
How, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about...changed since...?
Tell me how you go about... What do you do?
Concluding Comments

I would like to thank you for sharing your thoughts with me today. I note in particular your ideas about.................
We seem to have covered a great deal of ground and you have been very patient. Is there anything we have missed out and you would like to add before we finish? (Gillham, 2005)
Is there anything you would like to ask me? (Charmaz, 2003, p316)

Do you have any other comments about what we have discussed, or about the research as a whole?

Can I contact you next week in case there is something else you remember? I will leave this journal with you to record any additional thoughts. Would you prefer I phoned you or emailed you next week to follow up? (Check contact details)

I will be organising a transcript of our discussion. Would you like to review the transcript of what you have said and check the accuracy? I can send it to you via email or post. (Gillham, 2005)

Thank you again for your willingness to talk with me. I know your time is precious and I appreciate it very much.
Appendix D: Focus Group Presentation – August 2011

Project: Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practices: what they know, think, and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

Time of Focus Group: 3.30pm

Date: 22 August 2011

Focus group location: Quiet meeting area at the participants’ school such as a teacher’s classroom, an office in the administration building or the staff room

Interview equipment: Audio recording device; whiteboard; whiteboard markers; power point; power point slides for participants; copies of knowledge and action diagrams; drawing/writing paper; pens.

Other equipment: Afternoon tea

Facilitator: Linda Mahony

Participants: Sophia, Beverley, Ryan, Jasmine, Ava, Kimberly

School: Primary School
Thank you for offering to share your thoughts about your experiences with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. I would like to remind you that I am interviewing today as a QUT student, so that any discussion we have will remain confidential. I will not be using your name in any discussion, documentation or publication.

Some guidelines for the focus group session:
I would like to ask that you respect other participants’ confidentiality and not repeat what individuals have said during this session outside of the session.
I encourage you to say exactly what you think; there are no right or wrong answers. (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Please respect each other’s opinions. (Stewart et al., 2007)
Please speak up to enable all participants to hear what you have to say and for the recording equipment to provide an adequate recording of the session (Stewart et al., 2007) for transcription purposes.
Could I have everyone’s verbal permission to be audio recorded? (Stewart et al., 2007)
☐ (Have participant sign consent form if they have not already done so)
☐ (Test and turn on audio recorders)

In the case where there may be teachers from different schools present, participants will be asked, in 1-2 minutes to introduce themselves and to tell the group a little about themselves and how long they have been teaching.

First I am going to provide you with a little of my professional background which has influenced the research question for this study. Then I will be asking for your ideas.
Next, I will tell you about some of the background literature to my study.
Then we will discuss some preliminary results that are emerging and I will ask for your comment, opinion, and clarification.

During the bulk of my teaching career, I have been a teacher in the early years of primary school, mainly year 1 and 2. During this time, I have witnessed children experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents and the effects it can have on them. I would talk to other teachers or the child’s previous teacher to find out some background knowledge and some strategies that they had used to engage the child in their learning. Over the years of my career, I have gathered a few strategies. I came to realise that teachers hold much knowledge and practical strategies in their head. There does not appear to be any formal writings or explorations into how teachers come to know about young children from separated or divorced families, what they think about them, and how their knowledge and thinking about young children from separated or divorced families affects their pedagogy.
This led me to explore the research question.

The central research question is: What are the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers of young children experiencing parental separation or divorce?
Pedagogy is a broad term that takes in indirect teaching behaviours such as nurturing and maintaining relationships as well as teaching curriculum content. This study aims to
investigate the pedagogical practices or techniques of teachers that teachers draw on in their
day-to-day interactions with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

SLIDE 5: Discussion
This will make more sense as we go along, but essentially, I am trying to figure out what knowledge
teachers draw on and what action they take, and what goes on in between. Later you will see that
the participants in the study have given me some good information about what type of knowledge
they use and they have told me a lot about the actions they take with children. Now I am focusing
on what goes on in between; that is, what teachers do with that knowledge, and how they choose
what action to take or what to do with a child experiencing parental separation or divorce. Before
we get into the nitty gritty, can you tell me – for you personally, what goes on in between
knowledge and action?

Other prompting questions to get at the thinking processes:
- How do you know what to do?
- “what are your thoughts on...?” (Stewart et al., 2007)
- What goes on inside your head?
- How do you work with the information?
- How do you process the information or knowledge you have to achieve an action?
- How do you use that knowledge to engage in practice?
- Has there ever been a time you recall when you processed information differently?

Take a moment to think about it, chat with a partner, then we will come back and share some of
your thoughts.
(List responses on butchers paper, whiteboard – as well as audio recording.)

Prompts for responses:
- “Does anyone see it differently?”, “Has anyone had a different experience?”, “Are there
  other points of view?”, “Would you explain further?”, “Can you give an example?”,”Would
  you say more?”, “Tell us more”, “Is there anything else?”, “Please describe what you mean”
  (Kruger & Casey, 2009)

(If nothing comes up, say, “we’ll keep that bubbling in the background and return to it a bit later”)

SLIDE 6: Incidence of Separation or Divorce
This research is important because:
- Many countries in the Western world including Australia have reported that one in two of all
  marriages end in divorce. However, not all children’s parents are formally married, or become
  formally divorced and choose to separate.

(CLICK)
- Statistics on separation are not as readily available, however, the Australian Bureau of Statistics
  have estimated that almost one quarter of all children under the age of 18 years have a
  biological parent living elsewhere. This amounts to approximately one million Australian
  children living with a biological parent living elsewhere.

(CLICK)
- This has implications for teachers. In a class of 23-26 children, that equates to 5-6 children who
  may be exhibiting some effects of parental separation or divorce. As teachers see children for
  more time each day than any other adult apart from the child’s parents, teachers are in an ideal
  position to provide support when needed. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be greater
  understanding of the pedagogical practices that can facilitate these children’s progress at school,
  as is the aim of this study.
SLIDE 7: LITERATURE: CHILDREN, TEACHERS AND PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE
Recent research evidence suggests young children experiencing parental separation or divorce may have diminished outcomes in emotional adjustment, mental stability, anti-social behaviour and academic achievement when compared to children from intact families. The teacher group in this study have identified these stress factors in children who are experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Stress factors associated with parental separation and divorce that contribute to the outcomes of children include parental absence, economic disadvantage, parental conflict, and compromised parenting.

Parental separation or divorce can have positive outcomes. The separation or divorce can come as a relief when parental conflict is removed. In some children, parental separation or divorce can produce resilience. Resilience relates to the individual’s ability to respond well to stressful situations, recover from traumatic events or situations, and make positive adjustments.

Resilience is important to this study because teachers are in an ideal position to act in a supportive role external to the family. Thus, teachers need to be aware of the positive influence they can have on a young child’s life.

CLICK DISCUSSION
For you, does this seem to be an accurate account of how parental separation or divorce may affect young children?
What is most important?
What is least important?
What is missing? (Krueger & Casey, 2009)

SLIDE 8: TEACHER KNOWLEDGE
We have discussed what teachers in this study have identified as being the various effects that parental separation or divorce may have on young children. Teachers in this study revealed that they have gained this knowledge by calling on their:

- Knowledge of the context, which is the teachers’ knowledge of their students and their family circumstance.
- knowledge of self and
- Knowledge of learners and learning.

Teachers gain knowledge of the context by
1. observing and listening to children – observing change in the child, having explicit and incidental conversations with children;
2. interactions with the family during formal and informal meetings;
3. formal school procedures and official records as well as informal discussions with colleagues;
4. Talk in the community.

Teachers gain knowledge of self through their personal and professional experiences. It includes the teachers’ knowledge of their personal values, dispositions, strengths, and weaknesses, and their educational philosophy, goals for students and purposes. This could be influenced by the teachers’ own personal life experiences with separation or divorce and/or their interactions with other children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Teachers gain knowledge of learners and learning through their undergraduate studies and related professional development opportunities. While participants in this study rarely referred specifically to formal theoretical knowledge, their comments have indicated knowledge of learning theories. For
example, participant 1 spoke of a child needing ‘help’ socially. Others spoke of children underachieving, being disengaged or unmotivated in their learning.

Knowledge of learners and learning has been gained from undergraduate teaching courses as well as formal professional development episodes. While no participant had received specific professional development regarding parental separation or divorce, many spoke of the transfer of knowledge they had gained from related professional development to episodes relating to young children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Some participants engaged in professional reading initiated by them when presented with a puzzling episode.

*Not knowing* may result from the child not presenting with an issue that may alert the teacher to the child’s parent’s separation or divorce or not being informed by another means. *Not knowing* may also be that the teacher is unaware of the stress factors that may affect a child experiencing parental separation or divorce.

Due to the dimension *not knowing*, that is present in every property, teachers have like detectives, relied on a range of sources in order to find out about children’s family circumstances and the impact separation and divorce has had on the young child.

**DISCUSSION**

For you, does this seem to be an accurate account of where teachers gain knowledge about parental separation or divorce and young children?

What is most important?

What is least important?

What is missing? (Krueger & Casey, 2009)

**SLIDE 9: TEACHER ACTION**

We have identified and discussed what teachers know about the impact parental separation or divorce may have on young children.

We have also discussed where teachers get their knowledge about children’s family circumstance and where teachers’ knowledge of parental separation or divorce comes from.

Teachers in this study have identified these actions when interacting with young children experiencing parental separation or divorce: (see slide)

**Emotional support**

*Counselling* –

teacher – pull the child aside to talk, give them the opportunity to talk if they feel like it (4), let the child know that you understand things at home might be changing (6), help the child organise things themselves (6); one teacher would tell certain children to put on their shield when they are getting hurt, let the hurt hit your shield and bounce off and do not take it on board.

and the school counsellor (2), contact the school counsellor if the teacher felt she was not qualifies to deal with the issue (4) (depending on school policy)

**Promote self esteem** - tread more carefully/interact gently with some children; give the child extra special jobs without it being obvious to the other children e.g. taking the roll to the office (2)

**Build positive relationships** – with both children and their parents so they feel they can talk to the teacher, keep the teacher informed; avoid taking sides (5)

**Open communication** – get to know the child and their situation, who they live with (4);

**Academic support**

*Tutoring* – to complete homework (4); this can be with a peer or an older student (4); allowing the child to complete homework and reading with the teacher before school and during breaks (21); or community volunteers (make sure you go through the correct procedure – working with children check)

**Modify expectations** – a teacher spoke of a child being reluctant to have a go during personal writing, she thought this was due to having limited experiences outside of school (possibly as a result of economic disadvantage or compromised parenting), she allowed this child to write about
anything; other teachers accepted less than what she knew the child was capable of in some instances.

*Provide additional experiences/materials* – tutoring, replacement readers or homework

*Classroom climate*

Teachers create a classroom climate where the child can feel safe and valued. Some teachers have the children (with guidance) devise the class rules and consequences so the children have ownership (1).

*Consistency* – teachers believe school is the place that stays the same (2) and children feel safe and secure when there is consistency in discipline and routine (6).

*Get to know the child/family* – sense of belonging

*Create a community environment* – open communication between teacher, parents and children; an environment where children aren’t feeling fearful of telling you something private (4)

*Create a calm, happy place*

*Being inclusive, using inclusive language* – being aware it’s not always mum who the primary caregiver is, it could be dad or grandparents, or uncle or aunty may play a role in parenting (3); instead of father’s day cards allow the child to make one for a special man; instead of father’s night or father’s day breakfast – “you need to be thinking...is this going to disadvantage or embarrass or highlight the fact that they haven’t got a parent who can come along or this is going to be difficult” (5). Perhaps call it ‘big men’s breakfast’ (5) and open the invitation for any significant male in the child’s life. “Being inclusive to make sure kids aren’t any different because of...what the parents are doing or the family situation.” (5)

*Leniency – with resources, rules etc* – teachers spoke of trying to treat everyone equally while also needing to look at individual circumstances and sometimes being lenient or making allowances (7), giving more time to complete things (4); gently encourage children to bring books back to school (2) or provide a replacement (6) so the child doesn’t miss out; giving time before school or during breaks to complete homework (6);

*Whole school approach*

Teachers spoke of maintaining open communication with other staff member and keeping each other up to date with the child and his/her context; and the need to monitor the playground if there’s a problem (1) or provide a back up for the teacher. The teacher is also able to draw other teachers in when she catches the child doing the right thing, sending the year 2 children to the grade 6 classrooms to show off his neat handwriting – focusing on the positive and boosting the child’s self-esteem (1), while putting deposits in the child’s bank

*Explicit teaching*

*Consistency* – among teachers, refer to the case of the boy who turned the chairs upside down – numerous teachers were involved in managing this episode; maintain expectation of a high standard of behaviour (6), not let children get away with things just because of their circumstance, adjust where you need to but keep things as normal as possible and expect their behaviour to be up to the same standard (6) – children look for that stability in the end (6).

*Keeping both parents informed*

*Monitoring playground*

*Welfare budget* – When children arrive at school without lunch, some schools have a system in place whereby children receive lunch from the school tuck shop and the bill is sent home. However, this is not always a solution for some families. Teachers have found on occasions that children are reluctant to take the bill home (2). This may be due to economic difficulties at home. Other schools will make the child a sandwich and provide the child with a piece of fruit (2). Other schools accessed the welfare budget to provide breakfast for children who regularly came to school with no breakfast. Other schools welfare budget can be accessed to assist needy families with excursions and camp (2)

*Managing behaviour*

*Make allowances* – allow time and space; teachers spoke of not being annoyed with some children if their books weren’t signed (2); bend the rules (4) slightly
Negotiate – talk with the child about how we can fix the problem (6), allow the child to have some control. In the case of a child talking too much the child may choose to sit by themselves for a little while, or they might sit with a different child that they are not going to talk to as much. The teacher may negotiate and make explicit times when it is ok to talk while you work as well as quiet work times (6)

Communication with parents – foster open communication with parents, parents feel more comfortable keeping you informed (4)

Contact school psychologist/welfare officer

Avoid confrontation – gently speak to the child and remind them of the class rules (depending on the severity of the behaviour) (7)

Respond calmly – when responding to the child wiping the teachers’ writing off the whiteboard, the teacher in this case responded calmly by saying “thank you for helping me and I’ll get you to do that later, but right now I want you to sit down.” (1)

Focus on positive

Redirect child

Empower the class – 

Consult principal

Remove class –

To illustrate:

One teacher spoke of a child who turned the chairs upside down. The teacher had empowered the class on a previous day. The teacher had spoken to the class in the absence of the child in question – “You’re all lucky people, sometimes Jake has got little problems because he doesn’t always see his dad. He’s got mum here and sometimes that’s a problem for him, so we’ve got to encourage him to make good decisions.” The teacher avoided confrontation with him. On this particular day, the child was out of control so she calmly stood all the children up and removed the class outside for a game and left Jake in the room. She opened the double doors and asked the neighbouring teacher to supervise him (1). The boy ran outside, around the playground. The teachers monitored him, but allowed him time and space to calm down. Then the teacher was able to talk to him, counsel him and negotiate rules, consequences, and about making good decisions. The teacher believed that this boy in particular needed clear guidelines, needs to obey the rules – that is a part of life.

Community

Family support – offering the parents assistance, recommend family counselling, organise tutoring if parents are not up to getting homework tasks done (4), be a good listener (5)

Community members

A participant spoke of community organisations such as the Lions Club offering funds to send children to a camp, children who may need an association with a male or they need to have a broader view of society and they perhaps need that opportunity (5)

Teachers also spoke of using these types of actions with child who had experienced other trauma such as the death of a parent, the child who had been abused (1)

SLIDE 10: My Conundrum

Coming back to the opening discussion. Perhaps what we have discussed so far has prompted other thoughts or ideas.

The data has revealed the knowledge teachers have about young children and parental separation or divorce, and what teachers do when interacting with young children.

SLIDE 11: ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION

What I want to know is how you move from knowledge to action with the child experiencing parental separation or divorce? What thinking or thought processes do you go through?

- How do you know what to do?
- How do you decide what to do?
What helps you to move from knowledge to action?
What is missing? (Krueger & Casey, 2009)

Prompting questions to get at processing:
- How do you know what to do?
- “what are your thoughts on...? (Stewart et al., 2007)
- What goes on inside your head?
- How do you work with the information?
- How do you process the information or knowledge you have to achieve an action?
- How do you use that knowledge to engage in practice?
- Has there ever been a time you recall when you processed information differently?
- What informs your actions?
- What do teachers do with their knowledge?
- What are teachers’ thinking processes when deciding how to interact?
- What role does reflection play? Tell me about your reflections.
- What do you think about when you are presented with a situation?

I’d like you to take a moment to consider your thinking processes, discuss it with a partner, draw, and write your ideas – whatever works for you. Then we will come back together and share ideas.

(Provide copies of the knowledge and action diagrams for participants to refer to, provide paper and pens for participants to draw/write)
(During discussion, it may be necessary to draw a blender type drawing with a filter – my version)
(Consider reflection in action and reflection on action)

**SLIDE 12: ACTIVITY**
If you were confronted with this situation:
What would you do? Why?
What has informed your action?
What did you think about?

**Scenario 1:**
Joe walked in the classroom, throw his bag down, pick up a chair, and throw it down. He then ran out of the room and hid in the corner with a ball.

What behaviour is this child exhibiting?
What knowledge could you bring to the situation that may help you gain an understanding of the child and this situation? Do you need any more information? Where would you get it?
In this case, the teacher did not offer how she dealt with this episode.
Symptoms or signs Joe is showing is diminished self-regulation and anger. The teacher interacting with Joe may have had experiences with other children displaying similar behaviours. Through her experience, she found out that confronting the child aggressively aggravated the child who was already angry. The teacher may draw on her knowledge of the context of the family and she may be aware of ongoing parental conflict (stress factor). Considering this knowledge (context, self, learners and learning), she allowed the child time and space to calm down before calmly speaking to the child to determine the problem, providing comfort. Later that day she grasped any opportunity to highlight positive aspects of Joe’s work. She called on him to do special jobs such as
taking the lunch orders or the roll to the office (massaging his self-esteem). During lunch, the teacher chats with the child’s previous teacher to gain further insight into the context and what the previous teacher found that was successful with Joe.

**SLIDE 13: Scenario 2**
If you were confronted with this situation:
What would you do? Why?
What has informed your action?
What did you think about?

_Sarah is a very quiet child. She appears to be very disinterested in her schoolwork. At times, she would quietly distract other children. She appears sad and lacking in self-esteem. After voicing her concerns with the principal, the teacher found out that Sarah would get herself off to school each morning, often without breakfast or lunch._

In this case, the teacher thought Sarah had limited life experiences in her home life. During writing, the teacher would allow Sarah to write about anything that she fancied.
The teacher would give the child special classroom jobs (such as taking the roll to the office) more frequently than other children to increase her self-esteem.
The school provided breakfast for children who did not have breakfast.
The teacher introduced a fruit break where children would bring a piece of fruit from home. A green grocer donated fruit to the school and Sarah would get a piece of fruit from the store of fruit in the staffroom.
Other interventions include giving Sarah the choice of where to sit so she would not be tempted to distract other children. The teacher may give Sarah special jobs and praise any good attempt at her work.
I want you to identify the action you will take in response to the scenario. When deciding on the action you would take, can you identify what has informed this action – what knowledge have you drawn on, what did you think about. You can refer back to the knowledge and action pages.

(Collect, take a copy of these worksheets)

**SLIDE 14: THANK YOU**
Thank you again for your professional support and comments.
Appendix E: Axial coding: Quantifying Data - Teacher Knowledge

| Sub-Category 1: Teacher Knowledge | FG | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | Total |
|----------------------------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| Source of knowledge:            |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |
| • Young children –              |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |
|   o Directly – explicit conversations | c  |   | * | * |   | * | * | * |   | * |   |   | 19 (90%) | 7 (33%) | 5 (24%) | 6 (28%) | 16 (76%) | 14 (67%) | 15 (71%) |
|   o Indirectly – observation,   |    |   | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |
|     o Context                   |    |   |   | * |   | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |   |
|     o Phenomenon                |    |   |   |   | * |   | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |   |
| • Family –                      | c  |   |   |   | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 20 (95%) | 14 (67%) | 9 (18%) |
|   o directly                    |    |   |   |   | * | * | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |   |
|   o teacher prompted            |    | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |  |
| • School                        | c  |   | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |    | 17 (81%) | 14 (67%) | 13 (62%) |
|   o Context                     |    |   |   |   | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |    |   |
|   o Phenomenon                  |    |   | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |   |
| • community - context           | c  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 7 (33%) |
| • enactive experiences –        |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |
|     o personal life             | c  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 10 (48%) |
|     o professional life          | c  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 19 (90%) |
| Not Informed                    | c  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 13 (62%) |
### Appendix F: Axial coding: Quantifying Data - Teacher Thinking

| Sub-Category 2: Teacher Thinking | FG | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | Total /21 |
|---------------------------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Reflexive thinking - FEATURES: |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |
| Internal conversations         | 235|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 21 /100% |
| Context specific               | 5  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |
| Reflexive thinking - FORMS:    |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |
| • Having an understanding      | 1235| * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 21 /100% |
| • Reliving prior experiences: |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 12 /57% |
| Personal life experiences      | 3  | * | * |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 3 /14%   |
| Professional life experiences  | 12345| * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | 11 /52%   |
| • Anticipate outcomes – think forward/planning | 1235| * | * | * | * | * | * |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 7 /33%   |
| • Intuition                    | 5  | * | * | * |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 6 /29%   |

Early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce
### Appendix G: Axial coding: Quantifying Data: Teacher Action

| Sub-Category 3: Teacher Action | FG | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | Total  |
|-------------------------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| **Constructing support:**     |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| • Emotional support:          | C  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | 20(95%) |
| Supportive environment        | C  | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 14(67)| |
| Promoting social inclusion    |    | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 5(24)| |
| Promoting self esteem         |    | * | * | * | * | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 7(33)%|
| Providing counselling         |    | * | * | * | * | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 16(76% 9(43%)| |
| • Academic support:           |    | * | * | * | * | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | 19(90)| |
| Tutorial support              |    | * | * | *  | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 5(24)%|
| Differentiated tasks,         |    | * | * | * | * | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 12(57)%|
| expectations                  |    | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 5(24)%|
| Inclusive language            |    | * | * | * | * | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 8(38)%|
| Accessing resources           |    | * | * | * | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 8(38)%|
| • Behavioural support:        |    | * | * | * | * | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 10(48)| |
| Self manage behaviour         |    | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 3(14)%|
| Teacher guidance              |    | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 8(38)%|
| **Forming Partnerships:**     |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| • Parents                     |    | * | * | * | * | *  | *  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 10(48)| |
| • School personnel            |    | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 4(19)%|
| • Community                   |    | * |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | 3(10)%|
Appendix H: Example of a Memo

Memo Number: 14
Title: Participant Number 14
Date: 6/5/11
Background information

Know

*How teachers come to know about family circumstances*

Participant 14 has had parents inform her about their separation and what they have noticed in the child “often a parent, a mother, will come and say, look, this is what’s happening and there may be some upsets or the child may be unsettled or whatever.”

She refers to [her home town] as being a small town and hearing on the “grapevine.”

Other times she has heard about a separation or divorce from another member of staff or the principal.

Occasionally the child will indicate by commenting how “they went to daddy's house on the weekend or something.”

*Where does teacher knowledge regarding the effects of parental separation or divorce come from?*

Participant 14 has personal knowledge of parental separation and divorce - “I’m divorced and my children were five years and - one was five years and one was nine months, so I've lived through it and I suppose you see more and more of it in schools.” During this time she observed her own children “my own experience with my own children and I just think children have to feel secure and I think same old same old.”

She has also had family and friends who have separated and divorced.

Participant 14 has an awareness of how the incidence of parental separation and divorce has increased over time – “my daughter, she was in Prep, she was the only child in her grade of separated parents. Now I’d say it could be close to half.”

Participant 14 has never received professional development in this area, however, during her own divorce she attended marriage guidance counselling sessions.

She has participated in other professional development that dealt with children who were experiencing grief and other trauma.

*Knowledge of the impact of parental separation or divorce*

“Depending on how the parent is coping, that really says how the child is coping.”

Participant 14 has witnessed the change in children resulting from their parents separation or divorce “The child may have gone from being just easily come to school, they get all worried and nervous about when it's time to leave their parent or whatever; probably not particularly focussed on tasks; maybe confused, especially if they’re going to this house this night and this place later in the week or whatever, not really sure.” “Separation anxiety” – internalising behaviour, academic
Participant thinks that children cannot learn if they are stressed, whatever the trauma may be “I think if children are upset or confused or they’re a bit worried or there’s a big change, like moving house or moving countries or something like that. You’ve really got to have the child together first before they can learn.” She feels that teachers need to know of trauma’s that may affect their learning “If there’re things that might change that a bit, well I think you as the educator probably need to know that.”

Participant 14 makes reference to the varying responses of children “some children manage change better than others.” She believes that a child’s response to their parents’ separation or divorce depends on the parents’ responses and reactions “it all depends on how the whole thing panned out.” “Very young children like grade 1s and ones like that, if it’s handled without high emotion negative emotions, I think they can adapt reasonably well and quite quickly, if there’s then routines set up in this household and this household.” In contrast to “where we’ve had court orders and that type of thing, but then you do often - when we’ve had that - highly emotionally children or they’re different to how they normally are, very anxious I would say. That comes out in lots of different ways.”

Participant 14 believes that parental separation or divorce influences the learning at school “Well I don't think they can learn particularly. I think a highly anxious child that is worried about things; I don’t think they really take in.”

She reflects on the perception that she has when interacting “Then you've really got to change tack with them and probably try and make them feel safe and secure and happy at school and almost forget about the learning or pushing them too much there.” Participant 14 is indicating that children need to be happy and content before they can engage in the academic program.

Teacher thinking
Participant 14 makes reference to the importance of not only the parents but other adults, such as teachers, who can make a positive impact on their wellbeing in the event of their parents’ separation or divorce - “I think little children need to feel very secure and I think all of a sudden a big change like that in their lives, I think needs to be handled very carefully by the, obviously the parents involved, but all the people around the child, for them to cope with it as best they can and then move on.”

Participant 14 considers individual needs. She revealed that she “was probably a bit more sensitive to it and even I would worry so much about the child, but that was probably even just coming from my own experience.” However, she refers to separation and divorce being more common in recent years and children “see it and hear about it and they know how and they have friends that have different homes and all that. I don't worry for children so much.” Because of this thinking, she “take the child as the child and if they were displaying worrying signs, I would worry, but just the fact that it's happened, I wouldn't worry for them.”

Teacher action
Participant 14 reflects on her own divorce and her observations of her own children when interacting with children experiencing parental separation or divorce. She “thinks children have to feel secure.” – Classroom climate – calm happy place.

Resulting from these reflections, she endeavours to “keep everything as it was and fairly - when I structured - for the child when they're going through it, that they can rely on this happens here and this isn't changing.” – Consistency. In her class
children clearly know the expectations and boundaries “this is how this works here and these are the boundaries, these are the expectations.”

Participant 14 assesses each child on their individual needs “if the client presented as very anxious and that they weren't coping, well yes, I would probably look to their more, I suppose, social, emotional health. Make sure I boost them up with different things; that they’re included in groups; that you make sure at play time that they're playing and playing with their friends.”

Participant 14 is lenient with her expectations of the standard of work she receives from a child enduring stress resulting from their parents’ separation or divorce “when I say they can't learn if they're anxious, I wouldn't not teach them or drop their work off because they need to be kept busy, but I wouldn't be pressurising them, I think, with work and all of that. I think it would be more their happiness in the classroom I think.”

Participant 14 increases communications with parents “check in with the parent more.” “I'd probably try and catch the parent more or try and get them to catch me, just to say how things are going at home. Not even so much at home, more how the client was feeling about school. Were they happy at school, happy to come, were they saying - that more I think. Just what were the child's impressions of school at home?”

“Sometimes it's simple things like readers and reader boxes when they're in different households, how you can make that more streamlines so that there's not a huge dramas, because this little one comes from a different house and they don't bring the reader box and then, depending on the child, they can be distressed about that.” Participant 14 makes allowances and gets them to read at school.

“Practicalities to make sure that the child doesn't miss” “Some people play power games of course and they don't hand on notices or they don't inform other parents or whatever well. You only have so much you can do there. Now with email and our newsletter, you can email it, you can send notices out and all of that, but I think the main thing is, that the child doesn't miss out while the parents may be working things out, or there’re different households or whatever.”
Appendix I: Example of a Summary Memo

Memo Number: 24
Title: What teachers know of the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children
Date: 13 June 2011

Interview Protocol: Question 4: Can you talk a little about your understanding of the effect of parental separation or divorce on young children.

Many teachers said that they knew little of the specifics of the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children (participant 3) as they had never received any professional development to confirm their knowledge. They spoke of ‘assuming’ the behaviours of young children they had observed were a result of their parent’s separation or divorce (participant 10).

Many participants said that different children react differently and the same child can respond differently at different times in response to their parents’ separation or divorce (participant 2, 5, 6, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20).

Participants who had the opportunity to witness the same child pre and post parental separation remarked that there was a notable change in the child (participant 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20).

Externalising behaviours
Participants noticed children displaying “attention seeking” behaviours (participants 1, 2, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20) such as wiping off the whiteboard, turning “all the chairs upside down” (participant 1), being vocal (2, ), throwing school bags and chairs (participant 7, 16), becoming “less mature” (participant 9) “disagreeable” and expressed negative feelings towards themselves (participant 1, ), angry, aggressive, non-compliant, easily distracted, distract others, talkative (participant 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 13, 16, 19 ), physical fighting with peers (participant 10, ), and ‘silly’ behaviour (participant 13, 16).

Internalising behaviours
Many participants described children’s response to parental separation or divorce as quiet and withdrawn, sad. (participant 2, 4, 5, 8, 11, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21), feeling of not being wanted (participant 16). Participants spoke of children having a lot of ‘anguish’ (participant 1), being traumatised (participant 3) lacking in self esteem and confidence (participant 2, 3, 15 ), being confused (participant 3, 14, 20), being anxious and stressed (participant 5, 9, 10, 15, 20), not knowing why they feel sad (participant 7), experiencing difficulty adjusting to new routines (participant 9), teary (participant 10, 13, 15 ), clingy to a parent (13) or teacher (15, 16), moody (participant 10), and feeling insecure (20).

Economic hardship
Some participants spoke of “financial hardship” (participant 2, 7, 20) which prevented the child from participating in activities similar to that of their peers, having to move house (participant 10), or not having a car (18).

Others spoke of single mothers having to work and children being left in the care of others.
Appendix J: Example of a Diagram – Concept Map
Early childhood teachers' pedagogical practice: What they know, think, and do with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Process

Observe child behaviour

Confirm reason for behaviour by reflecting on knowledge gained from...

Nodding - care for the person

Individual needs

Personal and professional experience

Knowledge of impact of S&D

Teachers' beliefs and personal practical theories (PPTs)

Positive impact of teacher and other adults

Reflective action; reflective practice

Adjust practice

Reflex on...

Participant 14

Knowledge

Summary

Parents

'Grasping'

Other teachers

Principal

Child

Knowledge source

Personal

Other divorced

Family and friends

Professional

Related PD

Incidence of S&D

Worried, anxious, attachment to parent, not focussed, confused

Internalising behaviour

Varying responses of children

Dependent on parent response

Academic

S&D effects academic performance

Feelings

Positive impact of other adults

Teachers

Others

Child as an individual

Belonging

Maintain structure and routine

Consistency

Clear expectations and boundaries

Social

Ensure they're included in groups

Emotional health

Boost self-esteem

Tenderness

Increase communication with parents

Makes allowances

Think

Do
Appendix K: Ethics Approval - QUT

Dear Ms Linda Mahony

Project Title:
Early childhood teacher's pedagogical practices: What they know, think and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

Approval Number: 1000000668
Clearance Until: 23/08/2013
Ethics Category: Human

This email is to advise that your application has been reviewed by the Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee, and confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

******* Responses satisfactory. Approved. Please provide copies of approvals when they are available as an update. ***************

Whilst the data collection of your project has received ethical clearance, the decision to commence and authority to commence may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance from other organisations or permissions from other organisations to access staff. Therefore the proposed data collection should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.

If you require a formal approval certificate, please respond via reply email and one will be issued.

Decisions related to low risk ethical review are subject to ratification at the next available Committee meeting. You will only be contacted again in relation to this matter if the Committee raises any additional questions or concerns.

This project has been awarded ethical clearance until 23/08/2013 and a progress report must be submitted for an active ethical clearance at least once every twelve months. Researchers who fail to submit an appropriate progress report may have their ethical clearance revoked and/or the ethical clearances of other projects suspended. When your project has been completed please advise us by email at your earliest convenience.

For variations, please complete and submit an online variation form: http://www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/forms/hum/var/variation.jsp

Please do not hesitate to contact the unit if you have any queries.

Regards

Janette Lamb on behalf of the Chair UHREC
Research Ethics Unit | Office of Research
Level 4 | 88 Musk Avenue | Kelvin Grove
p: +61 7 3138 5123
e: ethicscontact@qut.edu.au
w: http://www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/
Appendix L: Ethics Approval - DEECD

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Office for Policy, Research and Innovation

2 Treasury Place
Parkville, Victoria 3052
Telephone: +61 3 8631 7900
Fax: +61 3 8631 7910
P.O. Box 357
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

2010_000749

Mrs Linda Mahony
Box 89
LEARMOUTH 3352

Dear Mrs Mahony

Thank you for your application of 13 July 2010 in which you request permission to conduct a research study in government schools titled: Early childhood teachers' pedagogical practices: What they know, think and do with children experiencing parental separation or divorce.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. Should your institution's ethics committee require changes or you decide to make changes, these changes must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.

2. You obtain approval for the research to be conducted in each school directly from the principal. Details of your research, copies of this letter of approval and the letter of approval from the relevant ethics committee are to be provided to the principal. The final decision as to whether or not your research can proceed in a school rests with the principal.

3. No student is to participate in this research study unless they are willing to do so and parental permission is received. Sufficient information must be provided to enable parents to make an informed decision and their consent must be obtained in writing.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you should advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director.

5. Any extensions or variations to the research proposal, additional research involving use of the data collected, or publication of the data beyond that normally associated with academic studies will require a further research approval submission.

6. At the conclusion of your study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to the Education Policy and Research Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Level 3, 33 St Andrews Place, GPO Box 4367, Melbourne, 3001.

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