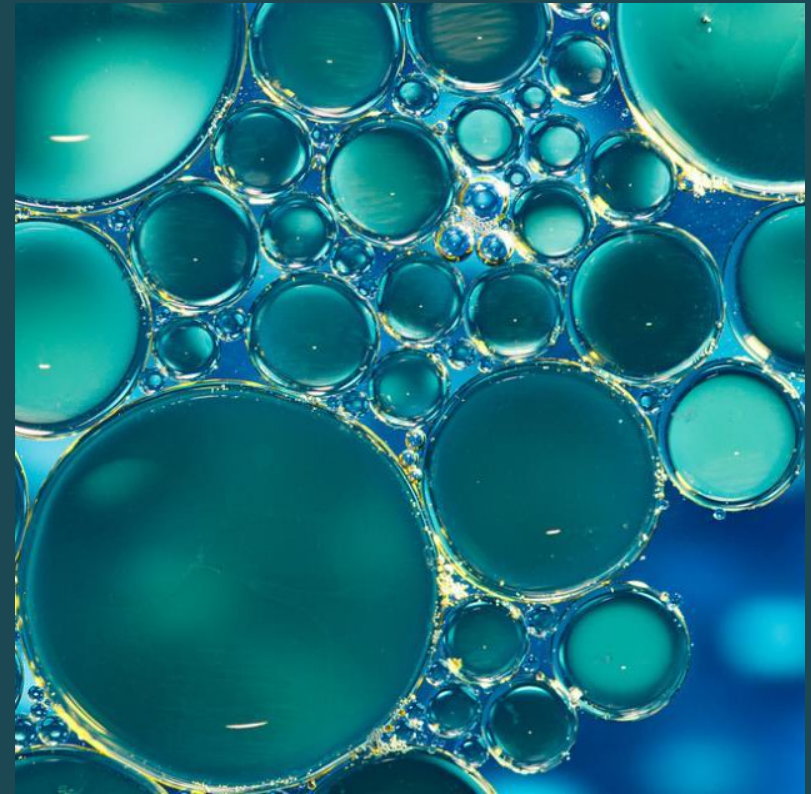# Collaborative Relationships: Working together to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC settings

Kerry Staples
Kerry is the 2015 Recipient of the Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship

Research Imperative

Inclusion is complex and is influenced by the

interactions between the family, professionals, early

childhood centre staff and the environment.

Collaboration

is embedded within a responsive cycle, dependent on

reciprocal partnerships.

"Collaboration is a cornerstone of high-quality inclusion."

(Odom, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011)

Early Childhood Australia & Early Childhood Intervention Australia
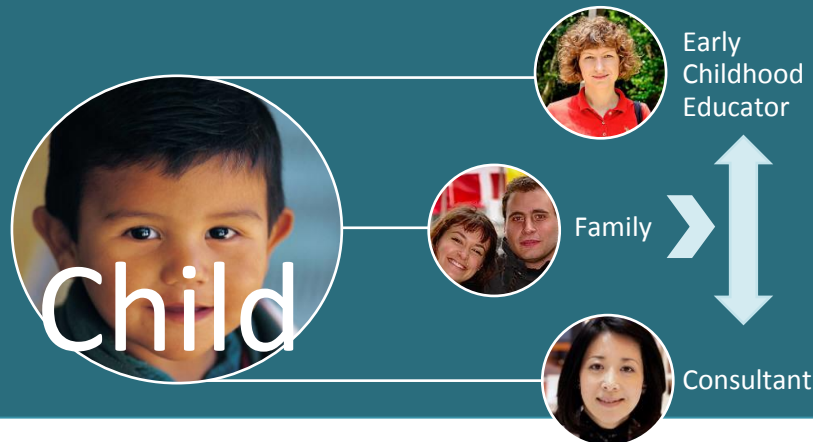# Joint statement on inclusion

This *position statement* focuses *on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education and care* in early childhood education and care settings.

Our position is that children with a disability have the same rights as all children and additional rights because of their disability. They share with all children the right to be valued as individuals and as contributing members of families, communities and society.

Every child is entitled to access and participate in ECEC programs which recognise them as active agents in their own lives and learning, respond to them as individuals, respect their families as partners and engage with their diverse backgrounds and cultures.

This means that ECEC services and support professionals must be resourced and supported to the level required to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high quality outcomes for all children.

Early Childhood Australia & Early Childhood Intervention Australia. (2012). *Position statement on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education and care.* Retrieved from http://www.disabilityinclusionstatement.org.au

Research Study

- Explore how collaboration between consultants and early childhood teachers contributes to the engagement of children with disabilities in the early childhood program

- Identify the mediating factors that influence the relationship between the educator and consultant.

- Examine the characteristics of the relationship between the early childhood educator and the consultant that result in the early childhood educator taking action to support inclusion.

Inclusion and Collaboration…it's not easy!

"It's really hard." (Nat, ECT 1 Interview 1)

"It can be just exhausting." (Nat, ECT 1 Interview 2)

"When I came in, they went, you know, she's experienced, she's been working forever in childcare, you know you'll be right, you can do it. But it is very daunting and there's lots of things that you, you know, you don't know you're not doing"

(Nat, ECT 1 Interview 3)

"So it was really hard to get to know the processes of how preschool works. It was really hard to kind of immerse myself into the world of early childhood and become used to all the terms, the knowledge, the paperwork, the practices."

(Neha 1, Consultant, Interview 1)

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Research informed by Vygotsky and the cultural historical approach to learning.

Through each interaction we are changed, we are transformed, we learn.

- Learning occurs through mediation
- Act collectively - learn by doing and communicate via actions
- Make, use and adapt tools to learn and communicate
- Community is central to the process of making and interpreting meaning

Practices are '… [h]istorically accumulated, knowledge-laden, emotionally freighted and given direction by what is valued by those who inhabit them'
(Edwards, 2010, p. 7).

Underpinning concepts

Visibility – documenting the system, interactions etc. makes it visible and allows us to discuss and question 'it'.
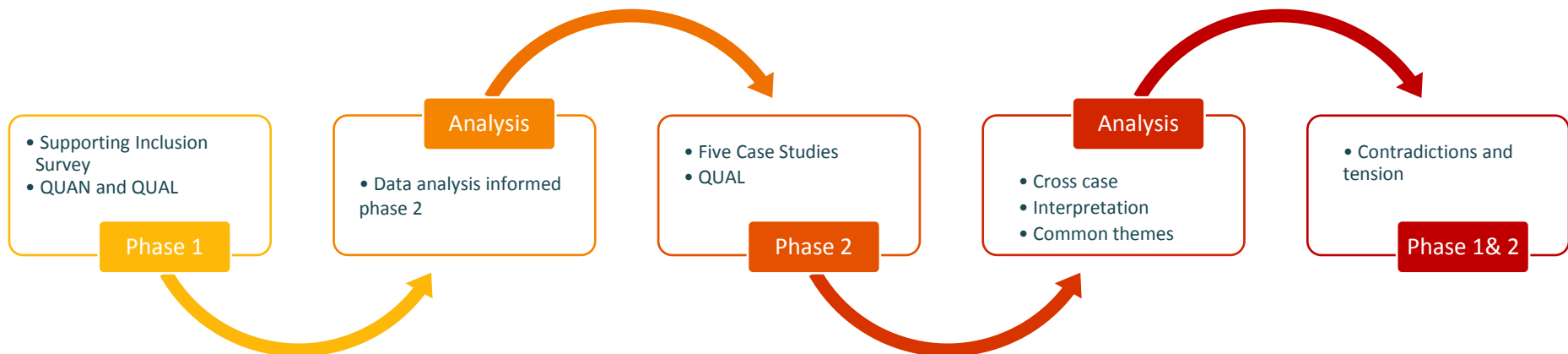
Multiple realities and complexities – there is no simple one size fits all solution to this wicked problem. Every situation is different, every child is different, every group is different and every combination is different.

Learning - social interaction and those interactions are mediated by multiple factors.

Change – it is implicit that change will occur through social interactions.

Research Design

- A mixed methods study

- An explanatory sequential research design

  - Phase 1 – Supporting Inclusion Survey (N=858)

  - Phase 2 – Case Studies (Five children attending ECEC settings)

• Supporting Inclusion Survey • QUAN and QUAL **Phase 1**	**Analysis** • Data analysis informed phase 2	• Five Case Studies • QUAL **Phase 2**	**Analysis** • Cross case • Interpretation • Common themes	• Contradictions and tension **Phase 1& 2**

Phase 1 – Supporting Inclusion Survey

Online self-report questionnaire

Distribution through professional networks, early childhood agencies and organisations

Respondents: Australian professionals supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings(N= 858)

- ECE (n=427) and
- Consultants (n=431)

UWS Human Research Ethics Committee Approval H8718

Image: Microsoft Clip Art

Phase 1 informed Phase 2

Professionals' perspectives suggest that early childhood educators' and consultants' perceive they are

- for the most part effectively working together and positively contributing to children with disabilities' outcomes;

- well meaning and 'try' to support the inclusion of children with disabilities to their best ability despite the challenges of time, communication, funding and other systemic barriers;
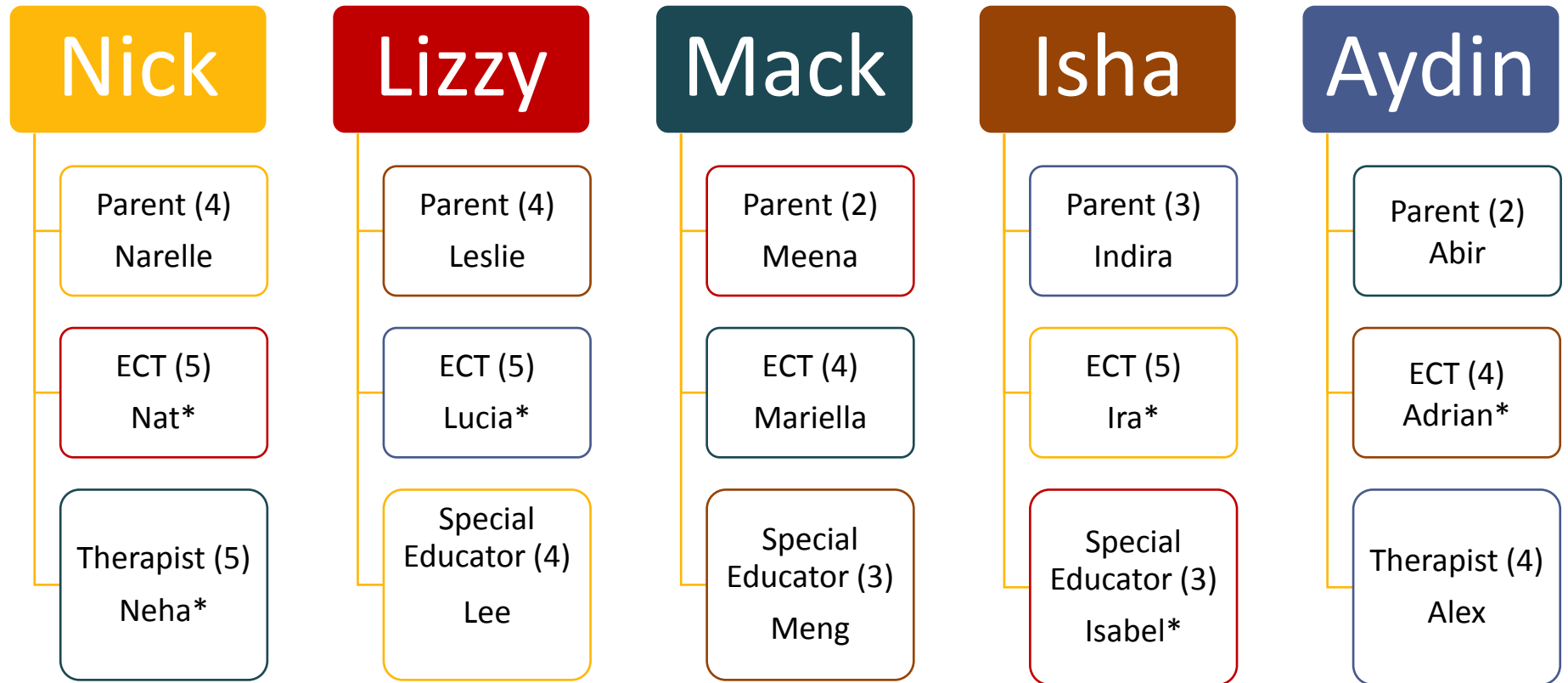
Opinions about the implementation of quality inclusion are not aligned.

- Educators perceive they are doing a good job BUT

- Consultants perceive there is more to be done.

This incongruity of perspectives disrupts the collaborative process and presents nuanced and unresolved challenges for professionals.

These challenges were explored in phase 2

Phase 2 - Case Studies

Nick
- Parent (4) Narelle
- ECT (5) Nat*
- Therapist (5) Neha*

Lizzy
- Parent (4) Leslie
- ECT (5) Lucia*
- Special Educator (4) Lee

Mack
- Parent (2) Meena
- ECT (4) Mariella
- Special Educator (3) Meng

Isha
- Parent (3) Indira
- ECT (5) Ira*
- Special Educator (3) Isabel*

Aydin
- Parent (2) Abir
- ECT (4) Adrian*
- Therapist (4) Alex

(#) number of interviews
* Represents more than 1 person

Phase 2 - Data collection

Multiple interviews at each setting with

- Early Childhood Educator

- Consultant

- Parent(s)

Observations

- SpeciaLink Inclusion Quality Scale (Irwin, 2009)

- Child's participation in the ECEC setting (notes, video and photograph)

Documents

- ECEC setting inclusion policy

- Child reports and portfolios

Analysis using Activity System Model

Identify the tensions and contradictions between the multiple factors that mediate the inclusion process.

A multilayered service system influences how educators and consultants work together

- Government requirements
  - National Quality Standards & Early Years Learning Framework
- Funding constrains employment of staff
  - Hours, experience & qualifications
  - Determines who visits and frequency of the visits
- Agency policies and procedures
- Family Priorities

Activity Theory

Activity: What is the focus of this activity?

Tools: What are the means in which the activity is being carried out?

Object Motive: Why is this activity taking place?

Subject: Who is involved in carrying out this activity?

Outcome: What is the desired outcome of the this activity?

Division of Labour (Roles and Responsibilities) How is work shared with others?

Rules: What supports or constrains the activity? What are the rules and regulations?

Community: What is the environment the activity is being carried out? Who else is involved?

(Adapted from Engeström, 1999)

Activity Systems

Tools: Expertise and experience; Relationship, interactions and approach; Time; Communication; Documentation; Curriculum and setting

Educator

Child's inclusion

Rules: NQS, Funding guidelines, Organisational policies and procedures

Community: ECEC setting; ECEC staff team; Child's family; Other children and families attending the setting; Team Around the Child

Division of Labour: Hierarchy; Experience; Qualification;

Shared space

Boundary Crossing

Shared Outcome: Child's belonging, becoming and being

Tools: Expertise and experience; Relationship, interaction and approach; Visits- time and frequency, Communication; Documentation

Consultant

Teacher's practices

Rules: Systemic and Organisational policies and procedures; ECI Best practice;

Community: ECEC setting; Family ECI network; Team around the child

Division of Labour: Setting expectations; Expertise; Availability;

Characteristics of the relationship

Both educators and consultants identified they

- were mostly satisfied with their relationships and

- value inclusion

Relationships that 'spoke the same language' and 'helpful' rated highly

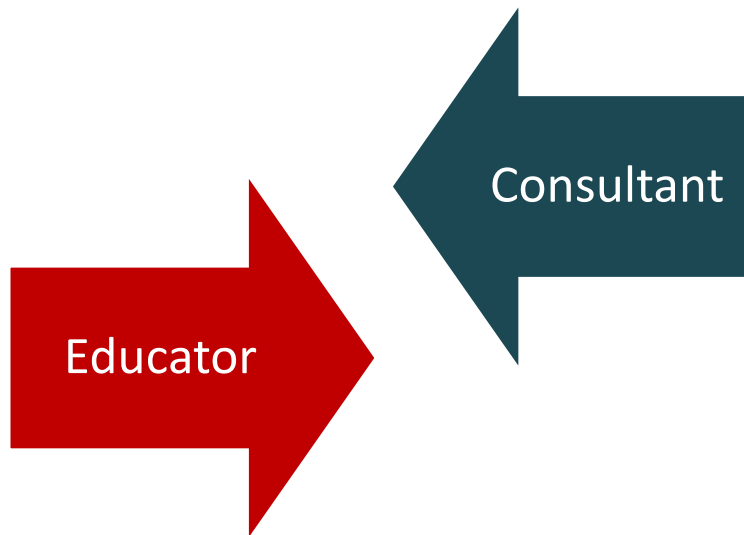Blending of practice positively influenced the relationship
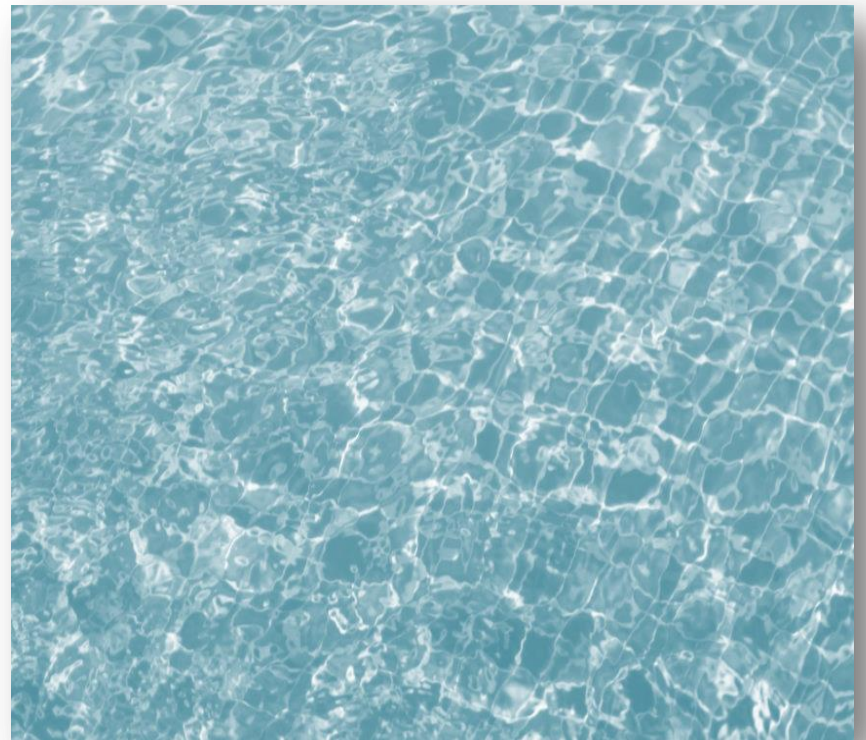
Tensions and Contradictions

Tensions between expectations and reality in the way professionals work together

Satisfaction with the relationship BUT

Misalignment of 'object motive'

Consultant

Educator

Actions of educators to support inclusion

As a result of the interaction what did educators do to

- create a quality inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting;

- make modifications and adaptations to the environment and curriculum;

- construct embedded learning opportunities; and

- use explicit child-directed instruction.

Sandall & Schwartz (2008)

Educators' actions: Universal Access

- Structural barriers to access and play spaces

- Older buildings <> new regulations

- Children rejected due to funding constraints and/or staff expertise

Image: Researcher's photos playground

Educators' actions: Modifications and Adaptations

Modifications made and equipment sourced as required

Available but not always well utilised

Educators' actions:
Embedded Learning Opportunities

- Little evidence of consistent relationship between families' priorities, planning and monitoring

- Educators' tended to be ad-hoc during implementation and monitoring phase

- Action influenced by educator's experience and expertise with planning and documentation

Image: Researcher's photo children playing

Explicit child-directed instruction

- During setting observations limited evidence of interactions in some settings

- Focus on supervision of children

- Limited sustained shared conversations with children

- Some children were withdrawn in small groups for specific teaching

Reciprocal relationships > Taking action

Common Knowledge is transferred more easily than specialist or domain specific knowledge which may need to be translated or transformed to be shared successfully (Edwards, 2011).

Relational Agency involves working with others to interpret and respond to complex problems by understanding the motivation of others and the resources available to them and aligning responses to the new interpretations (Edwards, 2011).

Relational Expertise is an additional form of expertise. It augments one's own specialist expertise and responds to the collaborative partner's expertise. It makes fluid and responsive collaborations possible across practice boundaries (Edwards, 2010).

> *"to share expertise rather than simply bring expertise"*
>
> (Lucia, ECE, Interview 2)

Common Knowledge: Measuring success

Common knowledge involves recognising and responding to other's expertise, perspective or **'what matters'** for each professional (Edwards, 2012)

How do we measure the success of inclusion?

Educators measured success in terms of social inclusion – friendship and fitting in.	Consultants measured success in terms of achieving goals.

"Because I feel like he's made friends and he's participating in a range of activities, not just the same things over and over again. And we're hearing his voice in decisions and in play so… and he's not so much like a follower, so yeah I think he's sort of part of the gang."

Nat, Educator, Interview 3

Social Inclusion a sense of 'Belonging' but what about 'Becoming' and 'Being'

After time perspectives and priorities changed for some educators

*"I would say that that inclusion has improved, that you know, especially the social inclusion for Lizzy has improved over time and just made me really think how, I mean **it's such a process**, so it's not well you do it well, you don't do it well, it's a process and you know, I think it's getting there, I have been really strongly aware of that sort of **not being satisfied just with social inclusion**, like I think in some ways that's often the easiest thing to do because you can be, you know, warm and inviting and you can tick all those boxes and them there is other stuff that needs be addressed, you know, **having high expectations** and things like that, so I would say you know, we have moved really well in some areas and then there are still others where you don't need to just be satisfied that yes she's playing well with the other children and all those of things and making connections with them and they with her."*
(Lucia, Educator 2 Interview 2)

Common Knowledge: Understanding the ECEC setting

Consultants, over time

- developed a more comprehensive understanding of the ECEC setting
- recognised and responded to the educator's perspective

"…as opposed to saying each day we're going to use lots of [sounds], give Nick lots of opportunities to do the sounds 20 times in an activity three times a day. I know that that would be near impossible in the preschool classroom, we've got to be a little bit more creative about how we incorporate that sound. And I guess I would be a little bit more flexible about how often that can occur as well. So understand if the teachers wouldn't have time to have to do that task for the day, yeah."

(Neha 1, Consultant, Interview 1)

Relational agency: Developing confidence over time

Agency relates to the taking of committed and responsible action in way that is strengthened by "self-evaluation, connection to the common good and attention to what people do" (Edwards, 2015, p.779).

> "I mean and we take a lead from them and it's the same with the O.T. Like we obviously take a lead from them and use, to pick their brains but it's still, say, even with the O.T., **it's still my job** to make sure that they're [the child] doing fine motor work and practising those skills, or whatever. Like I can't just say that's for the O.T. to do or that's for... that part of it is for the speech therapist to do, **it's meant for all of us**.
>
> (Nat, Educator 1, Interview 2)
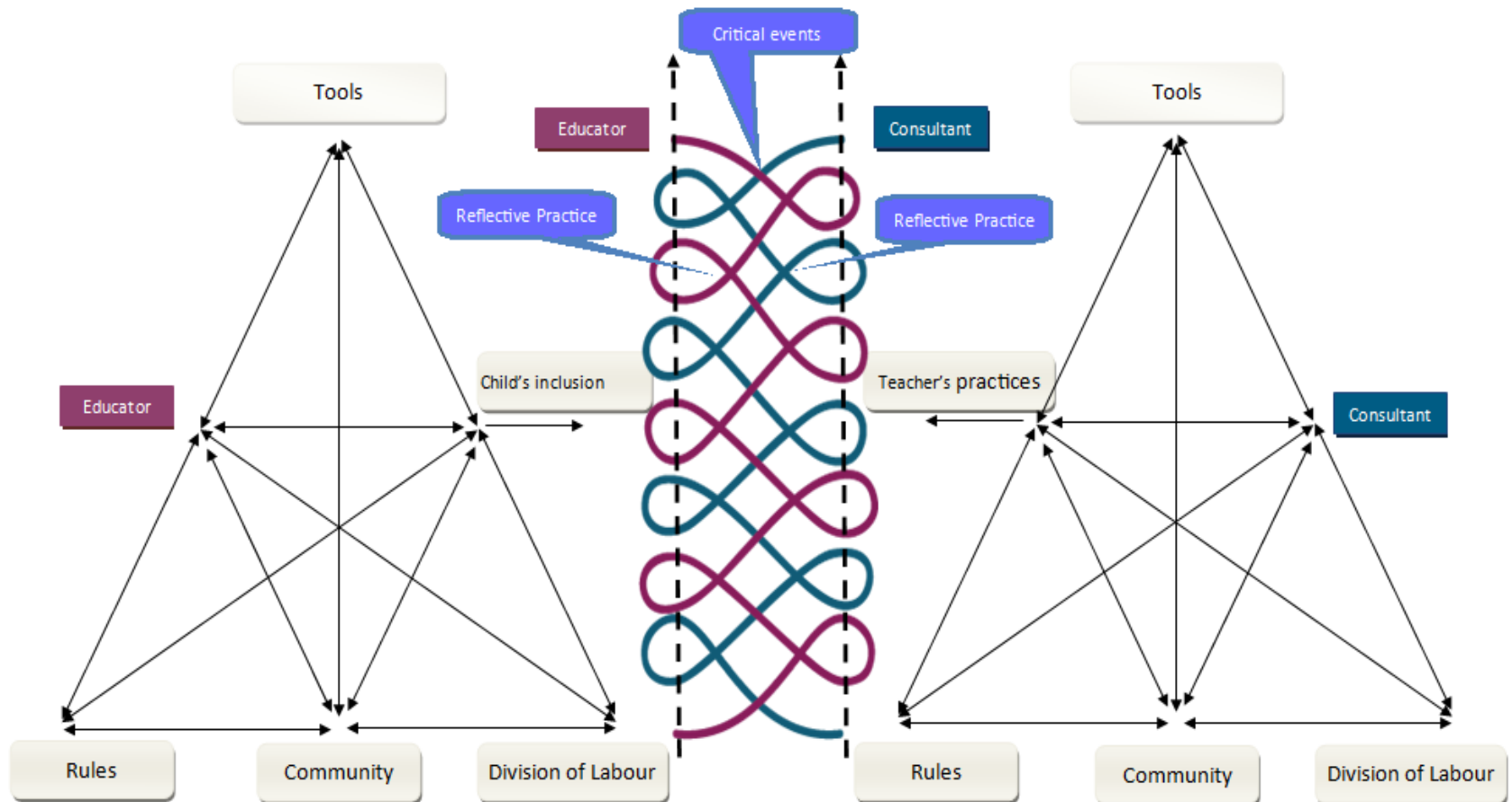
Supporting Inclusion:
An Iterative Cycle of Inquiry

Supporting Inclusion:
An Iterative Cycle of Inquiry

Educator

Consultant

Boundary Crossing

Shared space for problem solving

Agreed priorities and strategies

Taking action and documentation

Reflection

Reflection on others' context experience, documentation

Critical interactive events

Common Knowledge Relational Agency and Relational Expertise

Reflection on own practice; sharing of expertise
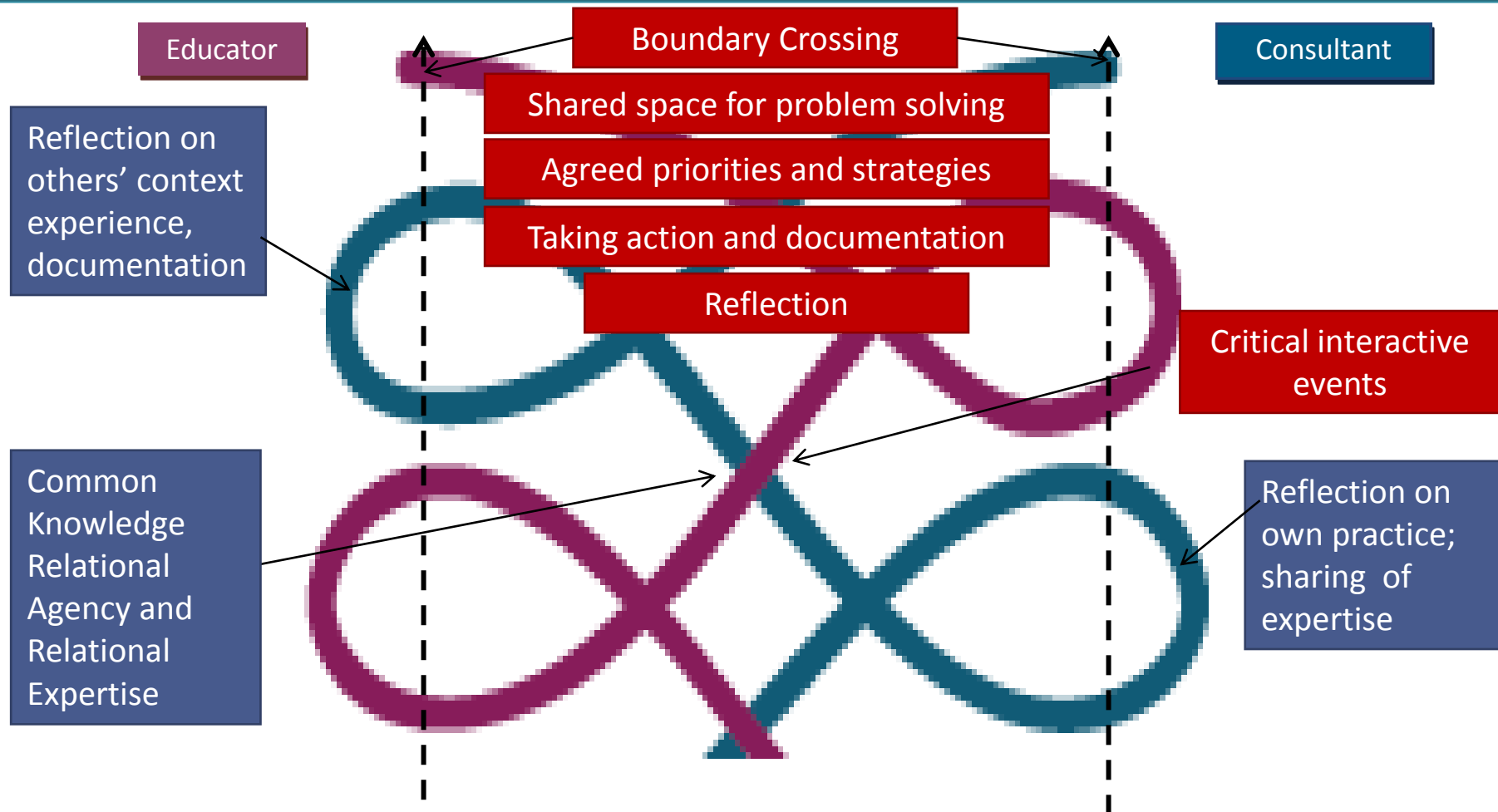
Supporting Inclusion:
An Iterative Cycle of Inquiry

Take time to 'check-in' on

- Agreed priorities – 'What matters'

- Agreed time for interaction

- Agreed actions

- Agreed documentation

- Agreed time to reflect in and on practice

Implications for Collaboration: Consultants

Common knowledge

- Understand the ECEC frameworks and philosophy

- Forward planning – time to make modifications

Relational Agency

- Avoid assumptions – build confidence and expertise

Relational Expertise

- Understand "what matters?"

- Recognise others' expertise

Implications for Collaboration: Educators

Common Knowledge

- Explain and listen

- Request help

- Share planning and documentation

Relational Agency

- Have high expectations

- Creating a space for collaboration

Relational Expertise

- Revealing "what matters?"

Implications for Practice: Educators

Supporting Inclusion

- Have high expectations of all children

- Plan for more than social inclusion

- Create spaces and experiences for children to learn

- Develop systems to share specific information with staff, other professionals and families

- Plan for consistent implementation and monitoring

*"I think you need to be reminded regularly that you should be thinking, **having high expectations** being prepared to be surprised and not, but you also need to, I think, to have the expectations in order to **create the space** in which that's possible because I think children respond very much to that kind of …well they don't really expect anything of me so I can just float along, that's what we all do, don't we? It's just easier, and yeah I think that really limits their experience if you're not offering them more, so… and I think they need to get something back, if they are going to make an effort then we have to respond to that to make it worth their while."*

(Leslie, Educator 2 Interview 2)

It's complex and messy!

- In the chaos there is a robustness

- Each interaction has the potential to strengthen the fabric of support.

- The system is strong and responsive, it bends and bounces back.

"I'm happy. I feel better, from the beginning to now I feel like we've come somewhere."

(CS1 ECT 1 Interview 3)

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