International Students Experience in Teacher Education: Creating Context Through Play Workshops

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Abstract: Higher education in Australia attracts many international students. Universities are challenged to prepare them with the necessary understandings, knowledge and skills to effectively participate in their study. For international students, understanding Early Childhood contexts in Australia is a new way of viewing teaching and learning from their own cultural perspective. This paper situates itself as part of a wider study "Improving work placement for international students, their mentors and other stakeholders". A pilot program was run at Deakin University for the Master of Teaching Early Childhood students to undertake play workshops before commencing placement. Questionnaires were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Three themes emerged and are discussed. The findings show that while play workshops may provide a 'place and space' for international students to gain knowledge, skills and understandings before going out on placement, they do have some limitations. Generalisations to other institutions cannot be made.

Introduction

Higher education in Australia attracts a large amount of international students across tertiary courses (programs or degrees). In the past twenty years, Australia has attracted many students from countries such China and the United States (Marginson, 2011). Australia has the third highest number of international students after the United States and the United Kingdom (Australian Government, 2015b). Enrolments have increased from 8.4% in 2014, to 9.6% in September (2015) with China and India as top countries (Australian Government, 2015c). The Australian Government (2015a) points out that 93% of international students favor the status of the institute, and 94% choose a qualification because of its reputation. International students (IS) come from all different walks of life; they choose Australian institutes for a variety of reasons including academic rigor and the wide range of experiences they can gain when undertaking a course in Australia (Australian Government, 2015a).

Research points out that IS come from different parts of the globe and face many challenges when undertaking study in a foreign country (Qing, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). Hence, they "require tailored programs and support services in order to create a level playing field with local students" (Gribble, 2014, p.2). For many IS coming from non-English speaking backgrounds, studying away from their home country is challenging (Andrade, 2006b; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). They lack the support of family and friends, they experience homesickness, they face challenges adjusting to their new work and study environment, and some incur financial issues (Brown, 2008; Campbell & Uusimaki, 2006; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009; Walters, 2012). Given the high

percentage of IS in Australia, they cannot just be seen as generating revenue to higher education, rather, they contribute widely to the economic wealth and cultural enrichment of the university, providing an international perspective to teaching and research. They also cannot be 'used' to improve the national and international profile of the institute (Taskoh, 2014).

International students face real and varied needs and challenges. Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) found this relates to the fact that many students come from different countries where they are not proficient in English and have to adjust to life/study. Differences like that of culture and language are challenging for them as they have to adjust to unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning which they may not have experienced in their home country (Andrade, 2006a; Crabtree & Sapp, 2004). Often the ways of learning and teaching in Western universities does not align with the diverse cultural backgrounds and the learning needs of IS (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, Van Gyn, & Preece, 2007). Grey (2002) suggests that IS have different and diverse teaching and learning experiences when entering higher education institutions. Hence, universities are challenged to create opportunities and pathways in regards to the mode of delivery, length of the courses and opportunities for workplace experience.

This paper situates itself as an aspect within the wider study "Work Placement for International Student Programs (WISP)"which took place across six universities between 2014-2016 (see WISP, 2016). The focus of this wider project was to identify and understand challenges, concerns and successes for IS undertaking field work placements in the area of education, business and health with the view to improve procedures, practices and work place assessment. Deakin University, School of Education (SoE) was one of the participating sites for the wider study.

The focus of the paper is to report on the findings of a small scale study that aimed to examine the extent to which a cohort of IS students studying a Master of Teaching in early childhood education (MTeach (EC)) were supported to gain an understanding of the play based approaches utilized in Australian early childhood education and care (ECE & C) programs. The students who are the subject of this study have come to Australia on international student study visas, arriving only a few weeks prior to commencing their studies. These IS came mostly from China and had all undertaken this course as they wished to teach in Australia after graduation. Anecdotal data gained through ongoing contact with this cohort of students after graduation suggests that all but one of these students has gained employment in ECE & C settings in Australia and have either gained or are in the process of applying for permanent residency. The MTeach (EC) at Deakin University is a post graduate initial teacher education course undertaken over two years. The course consists of sixteen units (subjects) of which six units focus on professional studies from both a theory and practical perspective. In order to provide context for the IS students in preparation for their first placement which was working with babies and toddlers, a series of play workshops were developed to enable the IS to actively engage with the play resources and materials they would find in an infant-toddler program. The workshops were developed in response to feedback from the placement mentors in previous years who identified that the IS students are coming to the placement with little experience with the play experiences offered to children in the programs and little understanding of the way play is able to support children as learners. These workshops were seen as a way to provide the IS with opportunities to engage in and explore the play materials they would be using with young children and to gain insight into play as supporting learning and development.

As there is a paucity of research in the area of exploring IS individual needs in relation to their work placement, this paper adds to the body of research in teacher education on how best to prepare today's IS for tomorrow's classroom. As authors, we are of the firm

belief that both local and IS are provided with subject matter knowledge (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) and pedagogical content knowledge (Schulman, 1998) in the MTeach (EC) course. They need to "know their stuff… the "nuts and bolts" of the curriculum (McArdle, 2010. p.69). in addition, to the 'what', 'why', 'when' and 'how' to teach (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The play workshops provide a 'place and space' for IS within the MTeach (EC) course to gain some knowledge, skills and understandings before going out on placement to (ECE & C) settings.

Play as a Context for Learning

Play as the context for learning underpins early childhood education pedagogy and curriculum approaches. Drawing from constructivist epistemologies, the Australian national Early Years Learning Framework presents play based learning as "a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.6). Research suggests that play is a child's natural dominant learning approach and contributes to knowledge and skill development across the cognitive, social/emotional, creative and physical domains, while also providing a solid foundation for future learning (Uren & Stagnetti, 2009). When children are playing, they are intrinsically motivated, pleasurably involved and actively engaged; it is these elements that provide desirable and optimal conditions for learning (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004). Play has been associated with the development of intellectual skills and understandings (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Lester & Russell, 2010). Through play experiences children integrate emotions, thinking and motivation that establish neural connections critical to effective brain functioning (Lester & Russell, 2010). Play has also been linked to growth in memory, self-regulation, oral language, and recognizing symbols, important for developing literacy skills and other areas of academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Learning through play should be self-directed, and children should experience a sense of discovery on their own (Fung & Cheng, 2012).
However, play has been misunderstood in pedagogical terms (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012). While play is considered to be an important element in an early years environment, many teachers are unsure of how to plan for such a curriculum (Moyles et al. 2002 cited in Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011, p, 73).

Enacting Play in Asian Early Childhood Curriculum

Early childhood education in many Asian countries has experienced significant curriculum reform since the turn of the century, drawing on a number of Western curriculum models such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Reggio Emilia, Montessori and the Project Approach, with strong emphasis on promoting child-centered, child initiated play based teaching and learning (Hui Li, Wang & Wong, 2011; Liu & Feng, 2008; Vong, 2012). Across these approaches play based teaching and learning is a constant theoretical underpinning. Within the early childhood education policy frameworks for many of the Asian countries DAP is the dominant early childhood practice (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Ebbeck, Yim, & Lee, 2013). The DAP Approach is built upon the play as the foundation for learning (NAEYC, 2009). This shift has led to transforming teachers' ideas about how young children learn where there is now a focus on the concept of play-based teaching and learning (Liu & Feng, 2005)..

Despite the curriculum policy advocating a child centered approach, studies have found that practice is still representative of the more traditional teacher directed curriculum of the past (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Hui Li, Wang & Wong, 2011) where children are seen as learning "when they are engaged in drill, practice and rote" (Wong, 2008, p.115). Although there has been a shift in policy to more play based pedagogies, many Chinese teachers have difficulties implementing a play-based curriculum and resort to developing teacher-led play-oriented pedagogies (Hua cited in Vong, 2012). The teaching style has been to reveal a transmission model of teaching and learning, with play being used as a mechanism for transmitting knowledge (Fung & Chen, 2012). In the traditional pedagogies children are expected to do the same thing at the same time and rarely work independently or in small groups on self-selected tasks (Vaughan, 1993). Yang and Yang (2013) found within a Chinese context that teachers took the lead when planning and organising the play experiences for the children, assuming more control and ownership of 'play' than the children.

Play has been used as reward time for the children to relax after their 'work', with no real learning intentions, rather, academic studies were seen as a priority (Yang & Yang, 2013; Wu and Rao, 2011). Wu and Rao (2011, p. 471) identify that in "Chinese culture, play and learning are separated and regarded as two different things, and play is even deemed as opposite to learning". Though the promotion of young children's agency has been identified as a foundation to learning, development and wellbeing outcomes, studies found that while the teachers espoused the value of play, activities were teacher directed and teacher dominated, with teachers providing instruction to the children regarding their play (Cheng, 2001; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Yang & Yang, 2013).

Play Workshops within the MTeach (EC)

The play workshops were conducted over the first five weeks of the semester leading up to the two week professional experience starting in week six. Each workshop was facilitated by the early childhood academic (Author 2). An English language academic also participated in the workshops to support the IS with understanding the colloquial and professional jargon commonly used in early Australian early childhood contexts. The workshops were two hours in duration. The first hour provided students opportunities to practically engage in a range of open-ended play experiences typically found in classrooms catering for the infant and toddler age groups. Author 2 introduced each workshop by modelling different literacy approaches which included story reading, story telling, singing and poetry. The teaching strategies included modelling effective approaches for transitioning children in and out of play experiences as well as the language used for engaging young children. After the modeled literacy activities the IS were given the opportunity and actively encouraged to spend time freely exploring and engaging with a range of materials that are commonly provided to support the learning and development of infants and toddlers (such as blocks, sand, dolls, dress-ups, books, play dough etc.). This workshop activity was provided to facilitate 'play' by supporting the students in using their imagination in creative ways. Whilst the IS were engaging with the play experiences, Author 2 joined the IS in their play and provided feedback on what she saw happening. By asking open-ended questions and modelling alternative uses for the materials, she questioned students in relation to 'what play was occurring'.

The second hour of the workshop employed the use of digital material as an effective way to introduce observation as an assessment tool and provided opportunities for the IS to practice this technique. The digital material was selected each week to focus on different

aspects of an early childhood teacher's role (such child development, interactions between adults and children and effective pedagogies) for infants and toddlers. After watching the videos, Author 2 asked targeted questions in relation to what they had observed. In addition, each IS was given an observation sheet to complete whilst observing the video. In this way at the end of the workshop the IS were able to share their observations initially in small group and later in whole group discussions. At the end of each workshop, Author 2 provided details of the activities such as the stories, words of the songs, poems, finger plays, recipes for play resources such as play dough, finger paint etc. that were used in the workshop. These were written out and uploaded to the Cloud learning site for the placement unit. This was to enable IS to access the resources to use whilst on placement and to include in their placement portfolio.

Methodology

Ethical approval was granted by Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee Executive to undertake the study. In 2015, the MTeach (EC) international students were invited to participate in a questionnaire in regards to their play workshops. The MTeach (EC) cohort consisted of 21 international students. They came from Mainland China (11), Taiwan (1), Hong Kong (1), Singapore (2), Malaysia (1), India (1), Iran (1), Italy (1) and United Kingdom (1). Given this small cohort, the use of questionnaires seemed plausible as an effective tool within the social sciences to gain information. Questionnaires are commonly used in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Creswell, 2010). They are a quick and easy way to collect data (Wisker, 2008). Questionnaires allow for closed and open-ended questions where the open-ended questions allow respondents to express themselves. Open-ended questions also provide a wide range of information (Kumar, 2011; Rowley 2014). Questionnaires provide the opportunity for respondents to articulate their opinions in a reflective manner (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015).

Once assessments were completed and results released, eighteen of the initial twenty-one IS enrolled in the course were invited via email to complete a questionnaire that focused specifically on the 'play workshops' at the end of the semester. From these, sixteen were from Chinese cultural and linguistic origins; only eleven returned the questionnaire through email in November 2015. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: Section A (on preparing for the placement) and Section B (on the content and teaching during the workshops) used a Likert Scale. Whereas Section C employed open-ended questions focusing on improving the workshops. Some of the open-ended questions included: What are some of the things you would like to have known or had an opportunity to experience before you went on placement? What you think will be helpful for new international students to be successful in their placements? What supported you most during the your placements?

The authors employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse and code the questionnaire data (Joseph, 2014; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith, & Osborn 2003). IPA as a research methodology employs phenomenology, interpretation (hermeneutics) and idiography (Smith, 2004). IPA is often used to explore the lived experience and perceptions of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). IPA attempts to "describe the experience as it has been interpreted by the participant" (Walker, & Burgess, 2011, p. 123). As a double hermeneutic, two interpretations are involved in the process, firstly participant's interpreting their own experience (making meaning) and secondly the researcher interpreting the participant's account (making sense) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Thus the "researcher carefully examines these reported

experiences, reflects on the perceptions and assumptions that underpin these experiences and finally interprets the experiences" (Kirkby-Geddes & Macaskill, 2016, p. 22). In keeping with an idiographic approach, small samples are commonly used for IPA studies (Smith, & Osborne, 2008). Both authors read and re-read the questionnaire data independently identifying emergent themes, they then met and compared and discussing the initial analysis before agreeing on three emergent themes. All data is reported through direct quotations (Ryninks, Roberts-Collins; McKenzie-McHarg & Horsch, 2014). As this was a small-scale study using a Likert scale and open-ended questions, generalisations to other teacher education courses in Australia cannot be made.

Findings

From the eighteen enrollments in semester two, eleven IS returned the questionnaire. The findings are discussed under the three sections of the questionnaire Sections A, B and C.

Section A: Preparing for Placement

By using a Likert Scale (1 = not at all helpful, 2 = a bit helpful, 3 = helpful, 4 = quite helpful, 5 = very helpful), students were asked to indicate what best reflected their thinking and understanding of preparing for placement. Nine of the eleven students found the play workshops were 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful' in gaining an understanding of the play experiences that children engage in. Nine also indicated that the play workshops helped them to understand more about play with young children. All but one student found the play workshops were 'helpful to very helpful' and prepared them to interact with the children when on placement. Eight out of eleven said the play workshops were 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful' in assisting them link theory to practice. They found watching the videos of young children and the interaction with the lecturer 'helpful' in assisting them to understand the learning and development of young toddlers. Interestingly, the same number indicated that the play workshops were 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful' in understanding what the educator was doing in the workplace. Though one found that this was 'not at all helpful' and found the videos only 'a bit helpful'. In relation to whether the workshops helped build confidence, seven said the play workshops were 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful' with none indicating that they were 'not at all helpful'.

Section B: Content and Teaching During the Workshops

Nine students indicated that introducing the workshops with stories, songs and other teaching strategies at the beginning of each session was 'very helpful' and one said 'quite helpful'. All of the other teaching strategies and content across the workshops sessions were seen as beneficial, with responses evenly spread from 'helpful' to 'very helpful'. These strategies included, for example, a range and variety of open-ended play experiences to explore and engage in play with the lecturer interacting with students during the play activities. It is interesting to note that the same student who felt that the videos were only 'a bit helpful' also felt these strategies to be only 'a bit helpful' in helping her to understand more about interacting with children. This student had prior experience in early childhood education. While the feedback provided to the students by the lecturer was seen as useful, six found this to be 'only helpful' with the others indicating that it was 'quite helpful' and 'very

helpful'. The other teaching behaviours such as modelling and interacting with the students during the play experiences were mainly seen as being 'helpful' (four responses), and the remaining being either 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful'.

Section C: Improving the Workshops

The open-ended questions focused on how the lecturer could improve the program to better prepare IS for their workplace placement. It was evident that most found the inclusion and demonstration of songs and stories to be most beneficial. Student 2 said "modelling of teacher practice by the lecturer" was most helpful. However, Student 1 suggested, "as most of us do not have teaching experiences in Australia, it would be very helpful for us to get some popular stories and songs that children learn…in Australia". Student 8 felt it would have been more helpful to "create a real context for international students who have never been to an early childhood [centre]". As students were not taken to an 'actual' site before their placement and most came from Asian countries, Student 6 strongly felt the need for:

> international students to have a general picture about how a children's centre and/or a room in the centre would be like before the first placement in the workshops. A general but whole picture, not different pieces of images about activities and how children learn though these are important information as well.

When asked about support during her placement, Student 4 commented on her negative experience during her first placement, "I struggled with the non-acceptance by the people of the centre". In contrast to her second placement:

> a totally different experience because the support came from the local mentor and the centre staff who were so supportive of me and made me feel welcome, which allowed me to completely enjoy the experience and learn a great deal from it, because the positive environment.

Student 11 felt that she was "being used" by her supervisor and felt she did not have the opportunity to gain teaching skills. When asked to reflect on what would help IS in their future placements, Student 6 and Student 9 strongly felt having practical experience and understanding of an Australian early childhood education and care setting was essential. Student 6 aptly said:

> I had completely no idea how a children's centre in Australia was like. I mean, for example, the daily routine, how they look like indoors and outdoors, how the teachers interact with children and etc. So, I felt nervous before and unconfident during the first placement...

Another aspect that would help international students was gaining a clearer theory-practice nexus. Student 1 believed that "more theoretical understanding of play theories and play models in early childhood is required through lectures and demonstrations". She suggested that it would be useful to have "more input from the lecturers about the play importance and play experiences". Student 7 also felt there was a need for more "emphasis on pedagogies, programming and planning" before going on placement. The role of the university academic during the placement was influential in students feeling confident and competent whilst on the placement. Student 11 found that her "school teacher (academic) was available all the time for my questions and always supportive". Similarly, Student 9 found "it was very helpful that teachers (academic) replied to emails and answered questions however, in emergency situations it was hard when they needed help immediately" and the academic was not readily available.

From the open-ended questions it was evident that students were not all that confident despite the five weeks of play workshops. Student 6 admitted "l lack my own confidence" and Student 3 acknowledged she did not know how to use "teaching strategies and pedagogies to plan for children". In a similar vein, Student 5 self-confessed that she did not have the confidence to know "how to interact with and what approach [she] should take with children during their play". Student 11 felt that IS should be "encouraged to take the initiative be confident and [have] enthusiasm" if they wish to succeed. Student 4 felt that having "a genuine interest of children would help enjoy the placement". In addition, she felt IS students need to:

> be open-minded and go with the flow at the placement. Regardless of your nationality, remember that you are in the Australian education system, embrace the differences. Also, show respect to the staff of the centre and accept all the different types of children, because they are innocent.

Discussion

From the analysis of the questionnaire three emerging themes are discussed under the headings: Preparation for the placement, Connections with Mentors and Understanding the Australian early childhood education and care context.

Preparation for Placement

Without contextual understandings with which to connect, the IS found it difficult to make the connection to ECE & C environments, and to feel confident whilst on placement. The play workshops were conducted in a seminar room typically found in a University setting. In this setting, the students were unable to make connections to the 'space and the experience' with what they encountered when arriving at the placement settings. While the workshops provided opportunities for IS to gain insights into the pedagogies and practices of Australian ECE & C settings, they did not allow the IS opportunity to practically apply the teaching strategies they had observed in order to build their own skills, which had not been factored into the workshops due to time constraints. This lack of applied learning opportunities appears to have contributed to the low confidence and competency levels the students may have experienced whilst on placement. The workshops were designed to enable students to experience play as learning but appeared to be somewhat abstract in nature as the responses indicated that the IS had not been able to connect what they had experienced in the workshops with what they were engaging in during the placement. Their lack of experiential understanding meant that they could not draw on past contextual understanding to make the necessary connections as evidenced by their comments. The IS perceptions were that they entered the placement with little preparation and knowledge which impacted on their confidence and feelings of competence.

Though the teaching material was made available at the end of each workshop, the IS still felt they lacked the competence and confidence to undertake singing and storytelling with the children on placement. They lacked the ability to model the teacher and incorporate this into their own teaching approach. As the most of the songs taught were unfamiliar for example (Five little ducks, Open shut them and Here is the beehive), the IS did not have the opportunity to engage in learning the melody, words and pitch accurately as this was not a key aspect of the workshop. They also did not sing or do storytelling in front of their peers leaving them little time to develop a 'tool box of strategies' to use when confronting this

expectation during the placement. This aspect, they found, challenged their capacity to engage and interact with the children. The lack of practical application in the workshops seemed to be a contributing factor why IS did not feel adequately prepared for the placement. They strongly appealed for more stories and songs to be taught and also given as a resource so that they could be used it in the Australian context.

Connections with Mentors

Though there was this lack of practical understanding and opportunity during the workshops on campus, what emerged for the IS student was 'feelings of success' during their placements. They felt welcomed, valued and supported by the mentor and fellow educators at their centres. This for them had the greatest impact because they were able to take the opportunity to learn, ask questions from the mentor and practice their teaching. However, for some IS participants, they felt marginalized leaving them feeling anxious about asking questions and confused about expectations when on placement. Hence, they may have felt that they did not have the necessary professional conversations with the mentor in order to consolidate their teaching and learning experience and understanding.

As well as the professional connections the IS reported as impacting on their feelings of being valued and supported, the ways that mentors also engaged the IS in the social environment of the centre also contributed to the sense that they were not accepted. The social environment in Australian workplaces is important for building a sense of belonging that impacts and contributes to productivity in the workplace, team cohesion and job satisfaction. The sense of inclusion fosters wellbeing both for the individual and for the staff team. When the IS were not part of this environment they felt not only isolated but also that they could not ask the mentor for feedback on their progress or day to day performance. IS noted the difference in their own sense of achievement when they shifted from what they described as a negative relationship with their mentors and fellow educators to an environment where they felt they were seen as equals within the staff team.

Understanding the Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Context

The IS commenced their MTeach (EC) with no experience of early childhood teaching or the education environment in Australia. Most had not been inside an Australian ECE & C setting prior to commencing their course. Their own schooling had largely influenced their understanding of teaching and teachers. As children most of them did not attend early childhood programs in their home countries.

The IS felt that they needed to have had exposure to ECE & C settings prior to commencing the placement as this would have provided some contextual understanding that may have been beneficial in understanding the expectations of the placement, the mentors and the assessment tasks. Working within this isolated 'bubble' of disconnection did not improve their confidence. The fact that the workshops did not effectively promote the practical application of the theory with the practice, alongside the lack of contextual understanding of how an ECE & C centre operates resulted in the IS feeling unsure, unclear as to what was expected of them. They were challenged to make sense of the learning infants and toddlers were engaged in whilst in self-directed play. The role of the educator in infant and toddler programs is predicated on the pedagogy of relationships. Educators engage with children to build secure attachments through everyday routines and care giving practices such as toileting, nappy changing and preparing children for sleep. This role is not the usual practice of teachers in traditional classrooms. The lack of opportunity to explore and examine

educator practice through exposure to ECE & C settings prior to the placement would have contributed to the IS having difficulties in understanding the expectations of mentors as to what they believe pre-service teachers in this context should be practicing. As the educators were not engaging in pedagogies familiar to the IS, but in fact appeared to be just playing with the children, understanding the teaching that was happening in the context of play was also difficult for the IS to critique.

Conclusion

International students undertaking study abroad generally find it challenging to adjust to their new and different living and study milieu. For the students in this study, the notion of internationalisation was about transition from their culture to a new learning and teaching culture that they will encounter not only during their teacher training, but also in their future careers teachers in Australian in early childhood settings. The play workshops were an effective tool to introduce IS to the practice of 'play'. The workshops provided the IS some useful strategies used by Author 2 to gain understandings of ways to engage with young children. However, the lack of practical opportunities during the workshops impacted on their confidence and feelings of competence when they went out on placement. Future approaches to supporting these students need to include opportunities to experience and observe teaching strategies for 'play' in real early childhood settings. The sterile nature of the university classroom appears to have impacted on the IS's ability to connect the workshops to the placement setting. In hindsight, undertaking these workshops in an existing ECE & C setting might have better assisted the IS to make the 'real' connection between the abstract and the practical. Some IS reported they felt welcomed, valued and supported by their mentor during the placement; this was a critical factor in their success.

As tertiary educators, we are challenged to prepare our IS teachers with the necessary skills, competencies and experiences to do well on their placement and also in the course (MTeach EC). As graduates, IS expect that the knowledge, skills and understandings gained from the course will assist them to find work. The limitation of the current study is acknowledged as the sample size was small. However, the findings show that 'play' can be used as a powerful tool to empower IS to make connections with ECE & C practices.

It is recommended that IS do consider volunteering ECE & C programs as an effective way to learn more about the Australian context. This may help them be better prepared for their study (placement). It is also recommended that IS make regular contact with the lecturer and or supervisor during their placement or course of study as this will help build understanding. Building strong and trusting relationships is beneficial for student retention (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). It is also recommended that work placements recognise the diverse skills of IS and encourage them to actively participate in the social life of placement.

This study has only focused on those international students studying an early childhood teaching qualification in Australia who were holding an international student visa. However whilst the findings focused on this singular group, it could be argued that other IS who have been in the country for extended time may also experience similar understandings of early childhood pedagogies in Australia. Generalisations about this study cannot be made to other educational institutions or context; however, the findings identified some of the concerns, challenges and successes for international students in this study at both university and on placement. Further research needs to be undertaken that impacts on systemic procedures and policies regarding ways in which academics and placement programs can effectively prepare international teacher education students

for study in Australia. If Australia wants to continue to attract international students from around the globe, then universities will need to invest more resources (time, money, staff) that takes into account the 'personal and professional' experience of the international student in relation to their career, work experience and employability. Without this it may be a challenge for universities to remain in the global competitive market.

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