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Alison Lord
Charles Sturt University

Laura McFarland
Charles Sturt University

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Pre-service primary teachers' perceptions of early childhood philosophy and pedagogy: A case study examination

Alison Lord
Laura McFarland
Charles Sturt University

Abstract: This study examined the experiences of three primary teacher education students participating in early childhood-focused community play sessions, as well as their perceptions of early childhood and primary philosophy and pedagogy. The purpose was to explore perceived differences in primary and early childhood pre-service teacher courses, which may then translate to differences in approaches to pedagogy in the field. Three pre-service teachers participated in a weekly community play session on a rural university campus in NSW, Australia. As these students had been educated in primary education pedagogy, a focus group interview was conducted to gain insights to their experiences in the play sessions, which had an early childhood emphasis in theory and practice. Qualitative analysis suggests that these students found several major differences in their early childhood and primary experiences. Themes and properties that emerged included Pedagogy (curriculum, parents, play) and Foundational Knowledge (developmental theory, discontinuity of development). These primary students found the idea of developing curriculum based on observations and interests rather than mandated Syllabus outcomes, challenging. Also, they found the role of play and parent-teacher relationships in early childhood and primary to differ. Students also noted a lack of foundational developmental theory, specifically in the birth-two period, in their teacher education course, and expressed the idea that younger children are discretely different from older children, rather than seeing development as a continuous process. Implications for teacher education courses and children's transition to school are discussed.

Introduction and Literature Review

Preparation of pre-service teachers by universities for work in educational settings is an important part of the overall development of professional teachers and formal education standards are required by law (Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy & Nosworthy, 2004). The majority of pre-service teachers' experiences during their undergraduate teaching qualification focuses on the foundations of education, including developmental psychology, managing learning environments and curriculum or Key Learning Areas (KLAs) including content and pedagogy appropriate to these learning areas. Pre-service teachers are then expected to demonstrate learning in these areas during formal professional experience in a variety of educational settings.

The variety of contexts accessed for professional experience during undergraduate teacher education courses depends on the teaching qualification and to a large degree on the requirements specified by teacher accreditation authorities. Primary teaching qualifications in NSW require pre-service teachers to experience a range of primary settings and classes over the duration of their undergraduate programs. Early childhood pre-service teachers whose qualification includes birth to 8 or 12 years are required to experience a range of classes in primary schools in addition to prior-to-school settings.

McFarland & Lord (2008) highlight how early childhood pre-service teachers benefit from professional experience by participating in weekly play sessions held on a university campus in preparation for formal block professional experience, whereby students plan play activities for young children. These play sessions provided pre-service teachers with opportunities to work with children birth to five-years old and their families in a sustained way over a university teaching semester.

The focus of this paper is to explore the philosophies and pedagogies in early childhood and primary teacher education through the experiences of three primary pre-service teachers enrolled in an early childhood subject that explored learning environments for young children. The primary pre-service teachers were required to engage in play sessions with children not yet attending formal school settings as part of the subject requirements. The primary pre-service teachers' emphasis on primary pedagogy had not provided experiences working with very young children either as part of on-campus classes or during their professional experience components as was clear in their responses to focus group interview questions.

Children in the early years of school are included with younger children in the accepted definition of early childhood of birth-to-eight years of age. However, the approaches to and understandings about teaching, curriculum, and parent-teacher relationships can vary between primary and early childhood pedagogy (Lickess, 2008). For example, primary education has more emphasis on segregated, mandatory curriculum and early childhood more of an emphasis on play and social issues (Jones, Evans & Renken, 2001). Thus, the play sessions in this study provided an opportunity to gain the insights of the primary pre-service teachers into the differences in early childhood and primary approaches to teaching. Some of these differences are discussed further below.

Transition to school

Transition to school research clearly shows that children's transition is more positive when there is collaboration between families, early childhood settings and school settings (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Much research also supports the notions that seamless transitions from prior-to-school to school, as well as program continuity can benefit children and families (Ashton, Woodrow, Johnston, Wangmann, Singh, & James, 2008; Brostrom, 2005; Margetts, 2003). Successful transitions are more likely when collaboration between early childhood services, schools and families exist, helping to create a balance between continuity and new experiences for the child (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). However, if approaches to and understandings about teaching, relationships, families and curriculum vary between early childhood and primary settings as well as in teacher education courses, program continuity may be difficult to achieve.

Some primary school teachers view communication between early childhood services and schools as being essential in the transition to school process. However, others do not see much value in considering the child's early experiences (Ashton et al., 2008). In one study, although early childhood services sent reports about children to schools and invited teachers

to come speak to parents before children transitioned to school, none of the teachers initiated contact with the early childhood services (Ashton et al., 2008). This study also found that although teachers placed value on communicating with families, there was not much indication about the need for fostering parent-teacher partnerships for the benefit of children (Ashton et al., 2008). This finding is consistent with other studies about establishing such partnerships (Ashton & Cairney, 2001).

Early Childhood and Primary Approaches to Curriculum

Approaches to curriculum can also differ depending on whether one is teaching in prior-to-school or school settings. Curriculum, originally from the Latin term for ‘racecourse’ was typically interpreted as a course to be completed (Whitton et al, 2004). Depending on one’s philosophical and theoretical point of view, curriculum can have competing definitions. For instance one such view of curriculum encompasses all the knowledge that students are taught and is external to the student whilst another view positions curriculum as internal to the students and therefore views curriculum as being defined by what the student is learning (Whitton et al, 2004).

According to Marsh and Willis (2003), there is a continuum of definitions that may cover interpretations of curriculum. One definition sees curriculum as “those subjects that are most useful for living in contemporary society (p. 8). This particular definition of curriculum places importance on the subjects being taught whilst placing little or no importance on the active participation of students in their own learning. Another definition sees curriculum as “all the experiences learners have under the guidance of a school” (Marsh & Willis, 2003, p. 9). This definition, whilst somewhat broader, ignores all the other learning that influences the learner and the learner’s readiness to participate in the school environment. The broadest definition offered by Marsh and Willis (2003) sees curriculum as “all the experiences that learners have in the course of living” (p.10). This definition gives importance to the role society plays in the development of curriculum that students will experience.

Depending on one’s philosophy of teaching including how one believes children learn and what one believes is important for children to learn will affect one’s approach to curriculum (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005). Approaches to curriculum often vary between prior-to-school and school settings.

Traditionally, approaches to school curriculum centre on what is important for children to know. Such approaches usually have an historical connection to behaviourally-based theories of child development. As such, a set body of knowledge believed to be important for children to learn is central to curriculum development (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2007). State syllabus documents are developed and mandated under these conditions and often are outcomes based, adult centred and often treat subjects in a very segregated manner. Content is determined and prescribed within syllabus documents and is often supported by commercial materials such as textbooks, curriculum support document and blackline masters (Arthur et al, 2005).

By engaging with a mandated syllabus document, teachers tend to focus on all children obtaining the set objectives or outcomes within a tightly set timeframe and expect that all children will learn the same things at the same time. This kind of approach that is typically seen in formal school settings and ‘fits’ with the very narrow definition of curriculum as “those subjects that are most useful for living in contemporary society” (Marsh & Willis, 2003 p. 8), and gives little or no consideration to children’s prior learning or to the importance of the family and community in the development or implementation of appropriate curriculum. As the role of family and community is not generally valued in the

development and implementation of curriculum, relationships between family, communities and schools are often not valued nor encouraged in terms of curriculum development.

On the other hand, curriculum development in prior-to-school settings often reflects the other end of the curriculum continuum, that is, the curriculum tends to be more child-centred, developed in careful negotiation with families and communities and considers the whole child (Soler & Miller, 2003). Curriculum is developed from observation and is individualised rather than reliant on a syllabus document. The focus in such settings is based on relationships rather than a syllabus document, is play-based and reflects the social nature of learning (Surman, Ridgway, & Edwards, 2006)

In NSW both the prior-to-school and school settings are guided by standards documents. The NSW Institute of Teachers Professional Teaching Standards outlines the standards teachers must reach and is central to the accreditation of teachers in formal school settings (NSW DET, 2003). Teachers in prior-to-school settings are guided by the NSW Curriculum Framework that focuses on the processes of learning, value diversity and social relationships and the building of social capital. The NSW Curriculum Framework places a strong emphasis on relationships, collaboration and partnerships (NSW DoCS, 2002).

Many young children in NSW attend some form of prior-to-school care, such as preschool or long day care, and then transition into a school setting. Thus, they are likely to experience different approaches to learning and curriculum depending on the setting. With the current Australian government's focus on the early years and transitions from home and prior-to-school settings to school, more needs to be done, particularly in the preparation of teachers to help smooth the transition.

Lickess (2008) highlights how primary school teachers may feel that 'formal' school is different to prior-to-school settings and that these differences justify the dismissal of child-centred teaching and learning strategies such as play. Early childhood teachers also perceive themselves as different to those that teach in the primary school sector. These differences are mainly around the language that each sector uses and the communication styles used to engage children.

In her comparison of the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services and the NSW DET's Quality Teaching Framework, Lickess (2008) has shown that both documents use almost identical language to acknowledge that it is impossible to separate a child's past, present and future when considering their educational experience. Lickess also highlights that both documents acknowledge that meaningful teaching encompasses the community and the culture of children. Lickess stresses that there is an argument for thinking about early childhood education and early formal schooling as a continuum that caters for the education of children birth to eight years of age rather than viewing prior-to-school and compulsory school as two separate events in children's lives. Lickess stresses that the obvious connections and similarities evident in both the NSW Curriculum Framework and the NSW Quality Teaching Framework should blur the line between early childhood and formal school and work in the best interests of young children.

If documents such as the NSW Curriculum Framework and the NSW Quality Teaching Framework are espousing similar approaches to how children develop and learn and how adults should interact with young children then such an approach should be evident in the way in which pre-service teachers are prepared to work with children, particularly in the early childhood years.

The focus of this study is to explore the experiences of three primary teacher education students participating in early childhood-focused community play sessions, as well as their perceptions of early childhood and primary philosophy and pedagogy. Implications for teacher education programs and children's transition to school will also be discussed.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher education course in a regional university in New South Wales, Australia. Twenty-six teacher education students consented to participate in the larger study. Three third-year primary teacher education students (one male and two females), enrolled in a subject focused on early childhood environments for play and learning, participated in this study. The three primary students were asked via email if they would be willing to participate in a focus group interview. All three agreed to participate. These participants were chosen because they had a unique combination of experiences: being primary education students, but also getting early childhood experience in the play sessions. It was thought that these participants could provide rich and in-depth perspectives on what these experiences were like and how they compared. Names were removed from all data and replaced by participant numbers so that identities could be protected. Participation in this study was voluntary and not required as part of the subjects for which students were enrolled.

Procedure

Student participants were enrolled in one or two undergraduate subjects in a teacher education course that were linked to weekly play sessions. One subject focused on infant/toddler development, education and care and the other focused on environments for play and learning. The three primary students were enrolled only in the environments subject. Students attended a weekly one hour lecture and one hour tutorial for this subject. Additionally, students attended one hour per week of play session. While attendance at the play session was a requirement of students, completion of measures collected for this study was not. Students attended three play sessions, had five weeks away from play sessions due to a practicum placement and study break, then attended play sessions for another seven consecutive weeks. During the fourth week of class, student participants completed a pre-practicum questionnaire and during the second to last week of class, completed a post-practicum questionnaire. A timeline of the procedure follows:

Weeks 1-3 Pre-service teachers attend weekly lectures and play sessions.

Weeks 4-6 Pre-service teachers on practicum; Only parents attend play sessions.

Weeks 7-8 No play sessions due to study break.

Weeks 9-15 Pre-service teachers attend weekly lectures and play sessions.

Play sessions took place one morning per week for 13 weeks during the spring semester. Parents attended all 13 weeks, while the university students attended 10 weeks due to their practicum placement. Sessions began on the third week of classes and continued through until the last week of classes. Play sessions lasted for two hours and were held in an early childhood curriculum room on the University campus. The room was equipped with a variety of resources including books, puzzles, dramatic play materials, art, science, blocks, playdough table, and an infant area. A morning tea area was provided for parents and children, and adult chairs were placed on the perimeter of the room for students to sit and observe and document children's and parents' interactions. A comfortable parent area with lounges and chairs was provided for adults to talk with each other and observe their children.

For the first two weeks, lecturers and a research assistant set up the environment and modelled interactions with parents for the students. This was done with the intention of easing students into their role during the play sessions. Beginning in the third week, students worked in groups of 3-5 as part of an assessment item in the infant/toddler development subject to design the environment and plan resources for a designated age group. Thus,

students were responsible for organising and running the play sessions, with feedback session with the subject lecturer following the play session each week. Students who were not involved in the planning for that particular week were encouraged to observe children and parents and interact with them as well. For the final three weeks of play session, students enrolled in the environments for play and learning subject were required to implement a variety of projects with the children. Lecturers were responsible for overseeing the play sessions, interacted with students, parents, and children, and gave feedback to students.

Parents attended the play sessions with their children. Parents were informed at the beginning of the students' role in the play sessions and of their responsibility for supervising the safety and well-being of their children. The role of the parent during the play session was left open; some parents chose to take a more passive role, allowing students to lead the interactions, while other parents chose to take a more active role in exploring the resource with their children. Regular attendance was requested of parents and they were informed that if they could not attend consistently their place may be offered to another family. Initially, a waiting list was maintained with a total of five additional families requesting a spot, but by week 5 all families on the wait list were offered a place.

Data Gathering

To address the three primary students' perspectives on their early childhood experiences compared to their primary-focused experiences, a focus group interview was conducted. The interview, which was scheduled at the participants' convenience, lasted approximately one hour and was conducted on campus two weeks after classes ended for the semester. The interview was audio recorded and later transcribed. Students were only identified with letters "A", "B" or "C" instead of their names.

The interview was semi-structured. The interviewer, who was one of the researchers, but not one of the students' current lecturers, had a set list of questions to ask, but participants were able to discuss other topics, and probing questions were asked to get more information. The set questions were:

- What experience or opportunities in your primary course were provided to you that helped you understand young children?
- What kinds of early childhood practical and theoretical experiences have you had in your course?
- What did you expect to learn in your play session experience?
- How did the play sessions in association with the subject 'Environments for play and learning' impact on your thinking and on what you are learning about working with children and families?
- Did interacting with families in play session make you think differently about your role as a teacher?
- Do you think the early childhood experience with children and parents in play sessions will impact your practice as you go out in the primary school setting as a teacher?
- In your primary course has there been any emphasis on relationship building with families?
- Were there differences between your primary subjects and the early childhood subject/play session? What were some challenges and benefits for you?

Data Analysis

This study is based on the idea of phenomenology, which holds that important knowledge is gained through the understanding of others' experiences (McMillan & Wergin, 2006). The principles of the Constant Comparative Method (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 and Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) were used to identify themes related to participants' experiences in the early childhood play session. The audio-recorded transcripts were transcribed and coded by the two researchers and the final themes were decided upon after discussion and comparison of notes taken. As new codes were checked and re-checked against the initial or early codes, the researchers were able to develop, from the data, two major categories or themes each with several contributing properties.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the themes and their properties that emerged from the analysis of the focus group interviews. As the researchers analysed the transcript, notes were recorded about reoccurring themes and similarities across what different students discussed. From the notes, five properties were identified; curriculum, parents, play, developmental theory and discontinuity of development. These properties indicated the areas where students identified differences in their primary teaching course and their early childhood experience in play sessions. These properties were further grouped together under two major themes; pedagogy and foundational knowledge.

Major Themes	Properties
Pedagogy	Curriculum Parents Play
Foundational Knowledge	Developmental theory Discontinuity of development

Table 1: Major Themes and Properties

The theme of Pedagogy surfaced in the interviews repeatedly. Participants highlighted that through their experiences in an early childhood subject and play session, they became aware of several major differences in teaching approaches when compared to the primary school setting. The properties that emerged from the data reflect the areas where the differences were experienced and observed.

Curriculum

Participants noted several differences in EC and primary curriculum development. They discussed the contrast of EC curriculum developed from interests of the child based on teacher observations and primary curriculum developed through the mandated NSW Syllabus. Participants expressed that the idea of not having a mandated curriculum was difficult. They also struggled with the idea of how an educator would alternatively develop a curriculum based on observations of children's interests which promote the "whole child". The following quotes illustrate some of the issues around EC and primary curriculum experienced by the participants.

Just the project for this subject, asking what are your curriculum goals for this? Sort of what do you mean? And then it just seemed like am I focusing on gross motor, fine motor, it was like, where is my syllabus! ...I found this hard (student B).

I think the biggest thing was there was no syllabus. The learning was based on the interests as opposed to having the syllabus then finding their interests (student B). It's hard being in the primary, I'm finding having to check myself because as a primary teacher, it is very syllabus, syllabus, syllabus. I have to check myself that it is still fun and engaging. I find myself driven by the syllabus and having to tick the boxes and having to say I can meet these outcomes and we lose the creative focus (student B).

Whereas in EC I have no idea. Whereas in the classroom you have the evidence, the spelling is here, I can go against the outcomes. This is where they are supposed to be at (student B).

...it got me thinking, I still need to keep the students interested, so I still need to know how to recognise their interests because it was a big reality check for me because I was struggling to do this. Why am I struggling with this? I shouldn't be struggling with this even though I am a primary trained teacher. I am still a teacher. I am still working with children who have interests. I am an adult who has interests. It was a big wake up call...I think you get into this drilled in stage of outcome, outcome, outcomes. You've got to meet them, got to meet them, and you forget that they are kids who have interests because we are so focused on what they are supposed to know by the time they finish primary school and there is nothing we can change because this is what the people who sit around in the board of studies have decided that we need to teach the children this (student B).

When asked whether or not they had learned about how to record and use observations of children, responses included:

We looked at it but it was anecdotal records, running records. With English, with reading and bits and pieces but it wasn't observations of interactions, how they play, fine motor, putting it all together to develop. That's a whole different ballgame. I mean that's something I find hard even now (student A).

Whereas in the classroom I think we are observing did the children get the concept as opposed to how they are physically...the whole child because that comes to PE where you tick the box that they can kick, then you tick the box, whereas your observations whether or not the student can complete the task to complete the outcome, a big difference for me (student B).

Parents

When asked about how their primary teacher education course prepared them for building relationships and communicating with parents, participants indicated that this was not a big focus. Relationship building was not something that was seen as integral to pedagogy, as it is in most early childhood settings. Participants seemed to feel uncomfortable with the idea of communicating with parents. The idea that the educational was the teacher's domain and the parents were 'outsiders' also emerged. Some responses around this issue included:

I think I do freak out when I talk to parents, when I feel I need to go and talk to them. As opposed to in the classroom you organise them being there. It's in my space and I've got the knowledge (student B).

It was more along the lines of 'careful what you say when you talk to them, in case you say the wrong thing'. Say when they ask how their son is going and you say

'good' when in fact they are not doing good, they are doing poorly, but you say good as a generalisation (student A).

...first day of class we have to have a piece of paper ready saying, like a letter to parents saying, we are just developing our routine, or whatever, and maybe in the next few weeks you may come back and contact and we're more than happy to talk. But for now we need to establish a routine (student B).

You tend not to see the parents as much as they tend not to come in to pick their children up. They go out and wait in the playground or at the school gates, in the lines, and you chuff them off one at a time so the interaction is not there. So, if you don't develop it, it's not going to develop (student A).

Play

Participants also discussed the role of play in primary education. They expressed some difficulties with making the connection between learning and play as their primary teacher education course had not addressed this. Participants expressed the following thoughts on play:

But I thought it was a different sort of education to primary. I didn't understand how it worked on a general level. I understood play and learning but I didn't understand how it all worked together (student A).

...so making that connection. I'm having issues with that connection, but understanding is that they are playing next to each other but not really interacting, and so having to say 'modelling' and 'demonstrating' ...my head just doesn't make that connection of play and learning (student B).

We don't focus on play at all in primary. Play is just at lunch time and we supervise, duties and whatever, whether we're breaking up fights or whatever, we don't focus at all. Our PDHPE thing is sport, our PDHPE thing is skill development. We have to be able to teach the students the skills (student B).

Foundational knowledge

The theme of foundational knowledge emerged as participants discussed the extent of basic child development information and practical experiences covered in their primary education course. Foundational knowledge includes an understanding of how children develop and learn over the birth to five span. The properties of developmental theory and discontinuity of development indicate areas of their knowledge that may inhibit their understanding of very young children in the early childhood setting.

Developmental theory

Participants were asked specifically what types of early developmental theory was covered in their primary education classes and what early childhood practical experiences they had. For example, participants were asked if they covered birth-to-two development and associated theories, such as attachment theory. We asked about this in order to examine whether or not primary pre-service teachers had background knowledge of how children develop and learn over the first few years of life. We were interested in knowing about how pre-service teachers might then use this knowledge in their teaching. It was expressed by all

students that their coursework did not cover early development extensively. This property is illustrated in the following quotes when asked when the information was covered:

In the first year, child development (student A).

From then on it is forced into you from the Syllabus, trying to get back to the child, connecting it was really hard. Just as student A said is right, semester one first subject then that's it (student B).

I don't know what others have done but it was more of a, in passing rushed over just a quick, this this this...this early childhood stuff, you don't really need to know (student A).

I remember once, it was like a one week thing. Basically it was one week Piaget, one week Vygotsky, one week this...Pretty much its one week then over it (student B).

Most of the stuff we've covered is higher stage 2, stage 3 (student B).

It was evident from these students' responses that they were going to be entering teaching with little information about how children develop and learn in the first few years of life. Developmental information tended to focus on age five and beyond.

Discontinuity of development

In discussing their knowledge of early childhood development, it was expressed that young children, specifically those under three, were seen as discretely different from older children. Thus, child development was not seen as a continuous process whereby early development influences later development. In light of this, the teaching of young children was seen to be very different from the teaching of older children. The following responses illustrate this property:

I've not taught in a kindergarten and I am going to be thrown into the biggest deep end if I get kindergarten for my internship. It's just, I have no idea how to teach them, or what to teach them...(student B).

How do you find their interest? Well, what are they playing with? Can you talk to them yet? How old are they before we can talk to them? (student B)

Participants did not see the value of having more of an understanding about birth-two development, as reflected in these responses:

Birth to two, probably not so much, but three to five, definitely (student A).

Because kids come in, generally a year or two lower, not five years lower down to the birth to two level. Unless in kindy, but I don't think it would be...you don't generally tend to have that big a difference. So, but then again, it would be beneficial to have that knowledge, but not that beneficial (student A).

Responses indicate that these pre-service teachers believed that they would have sufficient background knowledge to do their job as long as they understood the development of older children. Developmental knowledge of infants and toddlers was not seen to be in any way related to the development of older children.

Discussion

Approaches to the education of children have been found to vary between early childhood and primary settings (Lickess, 2008; Surman et al., 2006). These differences were highlighted in our interviews with primary pre-service teachers who had experience in an early childhood community play session. According to the research on children's transition to school, differences in approaches to pedagogy and in the understanding of early childhood development in these two sectors could impact on children in a variety of ways. For example,

collaboration between early childhood settings, schools and families promotes a more successful transition to school for children (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

It is also recognised that seamless transitions from prior-to-school to school, as well as program continuity can benefit children and families (Ashton et al., 2008; Brostrom, 2005; Margetts, 2003). Results of our study indicate that the focus of primary and early childhood teacher education courses may be quite different, which could impact on the ability of teachers to provide continuity of experiences for children during the transition to school. It was clear from the results of this study that primary education students did not feel they had in-depth knowledge about common pedagogical approaches used by early childhood educators and experienced by children, particularly in the areas of curriculum development, the role of parent-teacher communication, and the role of play in learning. This is understandable given that these areas were generally not included in their course content. However, given that research has found that teacher-parent communication is beneficial to children, families and educators during the transition process and generally (Dockett & Perry, 2006), it was surprising that our participants indicated that there was little focus on the role of families in the educational setting in their primary education course, as there was in the early childhood course.

It was also found that these primary education students did not have an extensive developmental knowledge of the early years and how early development influences later development. Rather than planning curriculum based on observations of individual children, the pre-service teachers in this study stated that they were guided by the NSW syllabus document and mandatory outcomes when planning for children. These pre-service teachers also tended to see children from the point they entered the school classroom rather than recognising that children bring with them a developmental past. Consistent with this finding, other research found that some primary teachers stated that they prefer to make their own observations of children when they begin school rather than utilise information about children's earlier development (Ashton et al., 2008). Although making 'fresh' observations of children once they begin school may be beneficial in reducing bias, it cannot be denied that later development is influenced by early development and a solid understanding of children's early developmental experiences is important in understanding children and parental concerns about development. This finding also supports Lickess' (2008) results where primary teachers viewed early childhood and primary settings as completely different, rather than a continuum.

Although this study contributes knowledge about educational approaches in early childhood and primary settings, there are several limitations to keep in mind. One limitation of this study is the sampling. The three students who participated made up a convenience sample and were not necessarily representative of all primary teacher education students. Also, due to the small sample, generalizability is limited. Although this study focused more on differences in early childhood and primary pedagogy, it is likely that if explored further, the participants would have acknowledged many similarities as well. Additionally, this study only included one teacher education program and it is not known if other primary education courses would have a similar content. Finally, the case was made, based on our results, that primary education courses should focus more on early childhood pedagogy and early development. For example, the importance of forming relationships with parents and the importance of play and observations should be recognised. While primary education students participate in practicum placements in their course of study, perhaps having some practical experiences in a prior-to-school setting (eg. observing a long day care centre) would give primary students more of an idea about the environments children come to school from. It would also give them an idea of the role of play in children's learning. Practical experiences that focus on building relationships with parents may also be useful in helping students

understand the importance of involving parents in children's education and using information from parents to best provide for children.

However, the same case could be made that early childhood courses should focus more on what happens in primary education as well. Future studies could examine early childhood education students' experiences in the primary sector as well as the effectiveness of teacher education courses that blend early childhood and primary teacher education, focusing on birth-age 12.

Despite limitations, the results of this study contribute to knowledge in teacher education. We found that there are indeed major differences between early childhood and primary pedagogy and developmental knowledge in the teacher education courses in this study. This suggests that early childhood trained and primary trained teachers who work in schools may come equipped with different skills sets and philosophies toward teaching. A lack of background in the development of young children may disadvantage primary trained teachers compared to early childhood trained teachers as they work with children in the early stages of school.

In order to help prepare students for working with young children in schools, degree programs that cater just for the preparation primary pre-service teachers need to engage pre-service teachers in deeper exploration of play-based approaches to learning, the importance of relationships and how to build and sustain parental and community relationships. Also, as recommended by Dockett & Perry (2001), teachers in early childhood and primary settings should share a common language so that reciprocal communication, which aids in the transitions to school, can be developed and maintained. We agree with Lickess' (2008) suggestion that early childhood and school settings should not be viewed as separate entities with a separate set of approaches to children, families and education. Rather, childhood development and the transition from the early childhood to school setting should be seen as continuous with connections being made between the two settings in the best interests of children. Teacher education courses should prepare both early childhood and primary educators to make these connections.

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