PRE-SERVICE AND EXPERIENCED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR WORK WITH FAMILIES

by

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Abstract

Family involvement in children’s early education has been associated with advantages for both children and parents (Corter & Pelletier, 2005). Although the outcomes of family involvement in child care settings have not been documented to the same extent as in school settings, there is growing evidence to suggest that children, families and childcare staff all benefit from these partnerships (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994; Owen, Ware & Barfoot, 2000). Early childhood educators (ECEs) in Canada and around the world are expected to establish partnerships with families and family involvement in child care has been extolled as a pillar of high quality child care (Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakoukou & Ereky-Stevens, 2014; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006; 2012). In spite of this, there is evidence to suggest that these partnerships may not be routinely established (Howe, Jacobs, Vukelich & Recchia, 2013; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). While it seems reasonable to suppose that the challenges of establishing partnerships between child care staff and families are multiply determined, the two papers presented in this dissertation focused on the prior experiences, perceptions and motivations of 432 pre-service and 30 practicing ECEs. The first study examined the influence of pre-service ECEs’ biographical experience of parent involvement on their perceptions of parent and ECE knowledge, the importance and feasibility of variety of family involvement activities and their level of preparation for these activities. The second study explored soon-to-graduate ECE students’ and experienced ECEs’ motivation to work with families, the qualities and skills they valued and what,
specifically, they thought parents and ECEs knew about child development and learning. Results indicated that pre-service ECEs’ biographical experience of parent involvement was related to their perceptions of parent knowledge, and their cohort (beginning or graduating) was associated with their perceptions of the importance of parent involvement activities. Although virtually none of the participants’ motivation to enter the field was directly related to supporting families, the qualities and characteristics they generally valued were those necessary for establishing partnerships with families. These findings underscore the need for further research on the influence of ECE training in relation to services for families.
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Chapter 1: General Introductory Comment

The research conducted for this dissertation is presented in the format of two professional journal papers. Both investigations involved the exploration of the early childhood educators’ (ECEs) perceptions of their work or their anticipated work with families. Both studies revealed information that can be used to inform the content and delivery of pre-service ECE preparation programs. In this first chapter the argument is made for the importance of establishing partnerships between childcare staff and families. Evidence that suggests these partnerships are not as prevalent as they ought to be is also presented and a case is made for the need to better understand prospective ECEs’ perceptions of this aspect of their role. The first study, which is presented in chapter two, explores the influences of pre-service students’ own biographical experiences of parent involvement on their perceptions of parent and ECE knowledge and their anticipated work with families. The second study, presented in chapter 3, examines soon-to-graduate ECE students’ and experienced ECEs’ motivation to enter the field, their conceptualizations of the qualities and characteristics of an effective ECE and their perceptions of specific aspects of parent and ECE knowledge about child development and learning. While each study is presented and discussed separately, the fourth chapter of this dissertation provides a brief general discussion of the overall findings and their implications for practice.

Family involvement in children’s early education has been associated with benefits for both children and parents. Research evidence suggests that children whose parents are involved in their early education are better prepared for school and that parents themselves feel more empowered with regard to their children’s educational activities (Corter &
Pelletier, 2005; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Kernan, 2012; Seefeldt, Denton, Galper & Younoszai, 1999). In addition, strong connections between families and schools during children’s elementary education have been associated with enhanced child wellbeing, higher levels of academic achievement and fewer behaviour problems (El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Fan & Chen, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; 2012; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Similarly, supportive two-way communication between families and child care staff has been identified as an important element of high quality childcare (Mathers, et al., 2014; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006; 2012). While the benefits of collaboration with families in child care settings have not been investigated to the same extent as family involvement in formal school settings, there is growing evidence that children gain from these partnerships too. The benefits of regular, reciprocal communication between families and child care staff include the provision of more sensitive, supportive and stimulating adult-child interactions across both the home and childcare environments (Owen, et.al, 2000). Strong connections among adults caring for children increases the likelihood that adults will know more about the individual child’s daily experiences and this supports the possibility that the demands on the child will be informed by knowledge of the child’s broader experience, across all settings. In addition, it seems reasonable to suppose that adults who communicate regularly with each other, about a child they both care for, might also benefit from a deeper and more nuanced understanding of each other. The adults would have opportunities to understand, in practical terms, each other’s values, preferences and priorities and how these things are interpreted in daily life.
This view is consistent with bio-ecological systems theory, which describes development as occurring in a series of embedded and interrelated systems all of which exert reciprocal influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 2005). The view that children live, learn and grow in the context of interrelated systems has informed the standards of occupational practice for early childhood educators (ECEs) in Canada (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2010). These occupational standards require Canadian ECEs to form collaborative relationships with families and to understand the communities they serve.

Recent attention in Canada and throughout the world on integrated early childhood services has highlighted the need for early childhood service providers not only to collaborate with each other but to build partnerships with families in order to support optimal development in children (Birnbaum, Russell & Clyne, 2007; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, Waniganayake, 2009; Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010; McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011; McCuaig, Bertrand, & Shanker, 2012; Valentine, Katz, & Griffiths, 2007). Canadian ECE pre-service preparation programs have historically included courses about working with families, and textbooks and college and university faculty members alike espouse the belief that developing and maintaining partnerships with families is an integral part of the ECE’s role (Wilson, 2010). But there is an increasing urgency that ECEs graduate from pre-service programs with an effective parent engagement strategy and the skills to engage a wide variety of families. The Canadian Child Care Human Resources Council (CCHRS, 2007) Training Strategy Project notes that the rapid increase in knowledge and understanding about the importance of early childhood development has heightened the expectations of the job of ECEs. Employers surveyed by the CCHRS reported that ECEs are now expected to deal
with changing family dynamics, cultural sensitivities and greater connections with other professionals.

In spite of the theoretical, empirical and policy related support for the value of reciprocal relationships between families and childcare staff, there is evidence that suggests these partnerships may not be routinely established. Observational studies of parent/staff interactions during drop off and pick-up transitions in childcare centres have revealed very brief or nonexistent daily interactions between parents and childcare staff (Endlsey & Minish, 1991; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). Furthermore, analysis of the content of these exchanges revealed that they were often superficial and uninformative from the parents’ perspective (McBride, Bae & Wright, 2002; Rentzou, 2011; Winkelstein, 1981). Routine communication between families and childcare staff during drop off and pick-up times is not the only way to develop partnerships with families but there is additional, indirect evidence to suggest that these relationships may not be consistently established. In their interviews of 261 Canadian parents, Nina Howe and her colleagues found that many parents’ lacked knowledge about their children’s childcare experience (Howe, et.al. 2013). In addition, there have been several investigations in which ECEs have reported feeling inadequately prepared to build alliances with a wide variety of families (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Chud & Lange, 1988; Cantin, Plante, Coutu & Brunson, 2012; McGrath, 2007; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003; Reedy & McGrath, 2010; Rentzou, 2011)

The likelihood of childcare staff establishing relationships with families is probably influenced by a number of factors. For instance, investigations into the organizational culture and leadership in childcare settings suggest that relationship-centered organizational
systems are a significant component in establishing effective partnerships (Douglass, 2011; Douglass & Gittell, 2012; Reedy & McGrath, 2010). It seems reasonable to assume that if relationships with families are highly valued by leaders, parents and staff alike, then the logistical obstacles to regular communication can be avoided. These logistical constraints on relationship development would include things related to service delivery such as staff schedules precluding parents from talking to the same person at both the beginning and the end of the day, or staff typically having more time for communication with families at the beginning of the day when parents are often in a rush while parents are more likely to have time to talk at the end of the day when the child care facility is closing and staff are anxious to go home. It is quite possible that childcare settings with priorities for establishing partnerships with families meet these challenges more readily. However, even with leadership and organizational systems that promote partnerships with families, childcare staff still need to have the skills to initiate communication with families and develop and maintain collaborative relationships.

It seems logical that the foundation for forging partnerships with families ought to be developed in pre-service training. ECE preparation programs in Canada are informed by national occupational standards (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2010) that require ECEs establish collaborative relationships with families and yet we have very little information about how well these programs prepare graduates for this facet of their work. The two papers presented in this dissertation describe the findings of an investigation into ECEs’ perceptions of their work with families at varying points in their training and careers.
The first study, presented in chapter two, examined the beliefs students brought to their training as a result of their own biographical experience of parent involvement in their elementary education. This investigation was inspired by a study conducted by Graue and Brown (2003) that examined the influence of pre-service teacher’s biographical experiences on their ideas about families and schooling. The literature regarding the influence of prior beliefs suggests that they can help to facilitate learning when ideas presented are consistent with previous experiences and beliefs and pose obstacles to learning when the material being taught is at odds with students’ own personal experience (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998). Given that collaborative family involvement has not been a strong part of current educational practice (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) it is important for college faculty members teaching in pre-service ECE programs to understand the experiences and beliefs about working with families that their students bring with them to the program. The second study, presented in chapter 3, involved an exploration of the extent to which working with families figured into pre-service ECE students’ and experienced ECEs motivation to enter the field, the qualities and characteristics they described as necessary for effectiveness as an ECE and their perceptions of the specific knowledge ECEs and parents bring to their partnerships. The fourth chapter contains a brief summary of the findings of these two investigations, suggests how they might inform pre-service ECE preparation programs and describes the need for further research in this area.
Chapter 2: The Influence of Prior Experiences on ECE Students’ Anticipated Work with Families

Abstract

Early childhood educators are increasingly expected to work in collaboration with children’s families (Kaga, et al., 2010; McCain, et al., 2011). In order to best prepare ECE students for their work with families, faculty members in ECE pre-service programs need to understand the prior experience and beliefs their students bring to their professional training (Graue & Brown, 2003). The teacher training literature suggests that students’ pre-existing beliefs are influential and potentially difficult to change (Wideen, et al., 1998). Long-standing beliefs can be problematic when pre-service student educators are expected to teach in ways that are fundamentally different from the ways in which they themselves were taught. This cross sectional study examined the beliefs of 215 beginning and 217 graduating students enrolled in a 2 year publically funded community college ECE diploma program in a large urban area in southern Ontario, Canada. Students’ biographical experience of parent involvement, their previous postsecondary education and their cohort (beginning or graduating student) were related to their ratings of the knowledge parents and ECEs bring to their relationships and to their assessments of the importance and feasibility and their level of preparation to engage in family involvement activities. The findings of this study underscore the need for further research on the influence of ECE training, particularly in relation to services for families.
Introduction

The current interest in early childhood services in Canada and throughout the world has highlighted the need for early childhood service providers to not only collaborate with each other but to build partnerships with families in order to support optimal development in children (Birnbaum, et al., 2007; Hujala, et al., 2009; Kaga, et al., 2010; McCain, et al., 2011; McCuaig, et al., 2012; valentine, et al., 2007). Considerable research suggests that parents’ involvement in their children’s early education promotes school readiness and increases parents’ feelings of efficacy regarding their involvement in their children’s educational activities (Corter & Pelletier, 2005; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Seefeldt, et.al, 1999). Joyce Epstein (1995) argues that parent involvement in education is important for a variety of reasons. These include the association of parent involvement with improvement of school programs, school climate, increased retention, and increased academic performance (Marcon, 1999). Most importantly, Epstein (1995) contends that when parents and teachers work together with common aims for children, they create a caring community that supports development and learning throughout the child’s school years. Given the positive outcomes associated with family involvement in children’s education it seems important to ensure that we prepare educators to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with a wide variety of families. In order to effectively prepare ECE students to work in partnership with families it is critical that we understand some of the beliefs and prior experiences they bring to their training that might influence their relationships with families. After all, one of the first tenets of effective teaching practice is to begin with what the learner already knows (Ausbubel, 1968). Early childhood curriculum in Ontario is primarily based in constructivism (Best Start
Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) and it follows logically that pre-service early childhood educator preparation programs also would be based on the same philosophical principles. Understanding the a priori knowledge and beliefs students bring with them to their program of instruction is good teaching practice when working with children and adults (Bruner, 1986; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011)

There is considerable evidence in the teacher training literature that pre-service teachers filter the content of their teacher training through their own personal belief system (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Unlike students of many other disciplines, students of education have been described as having “insider” knowledge when they begin their training because they have spent years in the education system as students (Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). The beliefs students bring to their training appear to act as both a foundation that can help to facilitate learning, when ideas are congruent with their beliefs, and as potential impediments to ideas that are inconsistent with their previous experience. Numerous investigations into pre-service teacher beliefs have concluded that if teacher preparation programs do not make students beliefs explicit and help students’ examine their thinking then students will probably teach in the same ways they were taught (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hollingsworth, 1989; Leonard, Barnes-Johnson, Dantley, & Kimber, 2011; Pajares, 1992; Tatko, 1996; Wideen, et al., 1998). This replication of the status quo is of particular concern in terms of the ECEs’ role in facilitating collaborative family involvement when this role is not a strong part of current practice (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Elizabeth Graue (2005) observed that pre-service teachers’ biographical memories of their own parents’ involvement in their education influence their conceptualizations of the
teachers’ role with regard to family involvement. She has argued that these conceptualizations are limited and that pre-service teacher training must broaden students’ ideas about family from those based on biography to those that include a broader awareness of race, culture, gender and class. Graue and Brown (2003) and Graue (2005) found that the predominantly white, middle class elementary and secondary pre-service teachers in their investigations were limited by their own biographical experiences of parent involvement. Specifically, the participants in their study reported high levels of parental involvement in their own elementary school experiences and expected that the parents of the children they would teach would support their work in the classroom in much the same ways as their own parents did. They found that their pre-service teachers were inclined to replicate the teacher and school directed relationships with families that historically have not been particularly collaborative. Graue and Brown (2003; 2005) argue that teacher preparation programs must help students understand how their own experiences may constrain their ability to truly collaborate with, learn from and support a variety of families.

It seems worthwhile, given the importance of and increased emphasis on collaboration between families and early childhood professionals to investigate the extent to which pre-service ECE students’ biographical experiences of parent involvement in their own education influence their expectations about their future work with families in childcare settings. To date the bulk of family involvement research has been conducted in school settings (kindergarten to grade 12) and the types of activities and correlated benefits have been documented in this context. Similarly, most of the research on teacher preparation has been conducted with students preparing for careers as elementary or secondary school teachers. Family involvement in ECE settings, specifically child care settings for typically
developing children, has been explored in a handful of studies. For instance, Douglas Powell (1998) has written about the importance of involving parents in child care programs, James Swick and his colleagues (Swick & Graves, 1993; Swick & Williams, 2006) have examined the role of ECEs in supporting families experiencing stress and Gail Zellman and Michal Perlman (2006) developed both a conceptualization and a measure of parent child care involvement. These investigations have focused on ECEs working in the field and not on the preparation of ECEs. We know considerably more about the role of prior knowledge and beliefs in the training of teachers than we do about their influence on the preparation of ECEs.

One area of belief related to family involvement that seems worth examining concerns the knowledge parents and ECEs bring to their partnerships. Very little is known about what pre-service early childhood educators believe about parents’ and early childhood educators’ knowledge of child development and learning. The ways families are involved in the education of their children in North America has typically been determined by the school, with teachers having more knowledge and power than parents (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Graue & Sherfinski, 2011). Knowledge often supports power and influence in relationships (Schieman & Plickert, 2008). For instance, McGrath (2007) found that information that child care providers had about children’s development was a source of power in their relationships with mothers. Given that knowledge can affect relationships in these ways, it is important to find out what pre-service ECE students believe parents and ECEs know about learning and child development. Their perceptions of parents’ expertise have implications for the potential for reciprocity in their relationships with families. Similarly, it is important to find out what pre-service ECEs believe are appropriate parent involvement activities and which
activities they would realistically engage in as well as their ideas about what prevents families from being involved in children’s early education.

The study reported here examined the influence of pre-service ECE students’ recollections of their biographical experience of parent involvement in their elementary education on their perceptions of family involvement. The cross-sectional design included entering and graduating cohorts of ECE students. If prior beliefs, based in students’ biographical experiences of parent involvement in their own education, are stable as judged by the graduating cohort, then one would predict students who had experienced higher levels of parental involvement in their own education would have significantly different perceptions when compared to students who experienced less biographical parent involvement, regardless of their training. If, on the other hand, we observe differences in beliefs between students in the beginning and graduating cohorts, while controlling for their biographical experience of parent involvement and any obvious confounding demographic factors, we can speculate that factors related to the ability to complete ECE training (e.g. persistence, academic preparedness, etc.) along with the program’s content might contribute to those observed differences. Specifically, based on Graue and Brown’s (2003) findings, we would expect that pre-service ECEs who recalled higher levels of family involvement would be more likely to perceive parents as more knowledgeable and family involvement activities as more important and feasible and themselves as more prepared to engage in parent involvement activities when compared to students who recalled less biographical parent involvement. In addition, it would follow logically from Graue and Brown’s (2003) results that students who recalled less biographical parent involvement in their own elementary education would be more aware of barriers to family involvement and would therefore
identify more obstacles that prevent families from getting involved in their young children’s education.

The cross-sectional design of this study precludes direct conclusions about changes in beliefs between beginning and graduating students. Students in the graduating cohort were able to persist in the program and probably differ, on average, from students in the beginning cohort on a number variables associated with success in post-secondary education. These may include academic preparedness and engagement in their field of study among other characteristics (Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Tinto, 1997). However, this study was intended as an exploration of the beliefs students bring to their training and the anonymity afforded by a cross sectional survey, as opposed to longitudinal tracking, allowed for maximum participation. In addition, having a cross section of beginning and graduating students did not negatively affect the exploration of pre-existing beliefs and other demographic variables on participants’ views about working with families. Given how little has been published regarding the beliefs of pre-service ECE diploma program students in Canada, this study represents a first step toward a better understanding of the content and influence of pre-service ECE students’ prior experiences and beliefs.

Method

Participants

This study involved Early Childhood Education students attending a two year diploma program at a community college in a large urban area in southern Ontario, Canada. The sampling frame included all first year students attending class during the second week of the program and all graduating students attending class in the final week of the program. The
sample of beginning students consisted of 215 first year students (87% of the first year cohort) and 217 second year students (84% of the graduating cohort). The students who did not participate in the study may have been absent from class during the data collection period or may have chosen not to participate. The majority of participants were female (95%), born in Canada (67%), spoke English as their first language (69%), and attended elementary school in Canada (74%). Only 8% of the sample were parents themselves.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a survey that included 6 Likert scales and several open ended questions; however only one of the open ended questions is reported here. All the items used in this study were adapted from those first used by Graue and Brown (2003) in their investigation of pre-service elementary and secondary teachers’ beliefs about families and schooling. The measures they developed and used in their investigations (Graue & Brown, 2003; Graue, 2005) of pre-service teachers beliefs and biographical experiences included a wide variety of parent involvement activities as conceptualized by Joyce Epstein (1995). Participants were given class time to complete the survey, if they chose to participate. No identifying information was collected.

Demographic information. The survey included questions on demographic factors that might influence participants’ beliefs regarding working with families. Questions included age, gender, place of birth, first language, number of languages spoken, country in which participants attended elementary school, whether participants attended child care, previous post-secondary education, whether participants were working part time, whether
they were parents themselves and whether their mothers worked outside of the home when they were children.

**Biographical parent involvement.** The first rating scale item was a Biographical Memories of Parental Involvement in Elementary Education Index that required participants to rate the frequency of their families’ involvement in 13 parent involvement activities such as *Agreed with teacher, Attended school events, Supervised homework*. Although these items were those used by Graue and Brown (2003), the scale was expanded from 4 points to 5 points (0 = never; 1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = frequently; 4 = always) in order to increase the potential variability in responses. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .88. Although the focus of the present study was on pre-service ECEs, I chose to use the same measure of biographical parent involvement as Graue & Brown (2003), which focused on events that may have occurred during elementary years (rather than early childhood). This was because adults typically have difficulty retrieving memories of events that occurred prior to age four (Hayne, 2004) so it would be difficult for participants to recall their parents’ involvement in their pre-school years. In addition, elementary school experience has been found to be associated with conceptualizations of teaching generally (Taylor, 2003). In the present study the measure was used to divide the participants into two groups based on their recollections of their families’ involvement: those with average and below average biographical parent involvement (Lower PI) and those with above average biographical parent involvement (Higher PI). The possible range of scores on this index was 0 (participant indicated “never” for every item) to 52 (participant indicated “always” for every item). The actual range of scores in this study was 6 to 52 with a mean score of 31.73, a median score of 32 and standard deviation of 8.8. Complete data on this measure were available for 415 participants
(17 missing). All participants with scores of 31 or lower were grouped into the “lower” biographical parent involvement group \((N = 220)\) and all participants with a score of 32 or higher were grouped into the “higher” biographical parent involvement group \((N = 195)\). The mean, not the median, was chosen as the basis for the split because there were 25 participants with the median score of 32 and using the median to create equal groups was not possible.

**Ascribing knowledge to parents and ECEs.** Two scales (one regarding parents’ knowledge and one regarding ECEs’ knowledge) required participants to rate knowledge of curriculum and child development that parents and ECEs bring to their relationships with each other. Participants were required to rate the frequency with which both parents and ECEs had excellent knowledge in 16 areas of child development and learning (e.g. “ways child learns best”, “developmental history”, “disposition”, “socio-emotional needs”, etc.). The rating scale consisted of 5 points \((0 = \text{never}; 1 = \text{rarely}; 2 = \text{sometimes}; 3 = \text{frequently}; 4 = \text{always})\). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale involving ratings of parent knowledge was .92 and the alpha for the scale involving ratings of ECE knowledge was also .92.

**Importance and feasibility and preparedness for parent involvement.** The final three scales required participants to rate 19 different family involvement activities in terms of their importance, feasibility, and the participant’s own level of preparation to engage in these activities. These activities included things like meeting with parents, calling and emailing them, sending newsletters, asking for parents input into the curriculum, engaging parents in daily conversations, attending gatherings outside work hours (see the appendix for a complete list). The 3 dimensions were rated on 5 point scales: *importance* \((0 = \text{not at all important}; 1 = \text{hardly important}; 2 = \text{somewhat important}; 3 = \text{quite important}; 4 = \text{very important})\).
important), feasibility (0 = not at all realistic; 1 = hardly realistic; 2 = somewhat realistic; 3 = quite realistic; 4 = very realistic) and their level of preparation (0 = not at all prepared; 1 = hardly prepared; 2 somewhat prepared; 3 = quite prepared; 4 = very prepared). Cronbach’s alpha for the importance rating scale was 0.88. The alpha for the feasibility rating scale was 0.90 and the alpha for the preparedness was .94. In an attempt to control for a possible social desirability bias, students were asked to rate both the importance and the feasibility (realistic-ness) of the family involvement activities. All family involvement activities might well be deemed important by graduating students, based on what they had been taught in the program, but those activities they deemed realistic probably portray what they truly value and are willing to try. Feasibility ratings were selected for more in-depth analysis.

**Open ended questions, coding and inter-rater reliability.** Participants were also asked an open-ended question about the barriers families might face that would prevent them from being involved in their children’s early education. The coding of their responses involved an open-coding technique, which required the constant comparison of participants’ responses in order for categories to emerge (Glaser, 1978; 1992; Kelle, 2006). Tentative categories of response were identified and modified based on a random sample of 100 participants’ responses. All participants’ answers were then coded using the tentative categories and new categories of response were created in instances when participants’ responses did not fit well into the existing categories. When a new category of response was created all previous responses were reviewed in order to determine whether the new response category was a better match for any previously coded answers. Once this focused-coding (Van den Hoonard, 2012) was complete and each category of response clearly defined, a research assistant, with no background in early childhood education, then coded a random
sample of 244 respondents’ answers (56% of the total). Agreement between the two coders for the 5 categories of responses ranged between 97% and 99% agreement and kappa values ranged from .77 and .97. These kappa values indicate high levels of agreement between raters (Kottner, et al., 2011).

Results

Comparability between Beginning Student and Graduating Student Groups

First, an independent-samples t test was conducted to evaluate whether the beginning students and the graduating students differed in terms of their scores on the Biographical Memories of Parental Involvement in Elementary Education Index. The test was not significant $t(413) = 4.43, p = .658$. The beginning students recalled similar levels of parental involvement in their elementary school education ($M = 31.92, SD = 7.91$) compared to the graduating students ($M = 31.53, SD = 9.72$), $d = 0.46$

In order to be able to speculate about whether ECE professional training appeared to influence participants’ responses I needed to establish comparability between the beginning and graduating groups, in terms of potentially relevant demographic variables. A series of two-way contingency table analyses were conducted to evaluate whether the beginning students and the graduating students differed in terms of demographic and personal history variables that might affect their responses (see Table 1). In the absence of demographic differences, the differences in their responses might be at least partially attributed to their experience in the ECE program.
No significant differences were found between the beginning student group and the graduating student group for all but four demographic variables measured. First, as would be expected, the beginning students were younger ($M = 21.19$, $SD = 4.91$) compared to the graduating students ($M = 22.94$, $SD = 4.91$), a significant difference by an independent-samples $t$ test [$t(377) = -3.48$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.36$]. Beginning students were surveyed in September when they began the program. Graduating students were surveyed 8 months later, in April, just prior to their completion of the 2-year program so the 1.75 year age difference between the groups can be accounted for by their place in the program sequence.

Second, the proportion of graduating students whose part time jobs involved working with children was significantly higher than the proportion of beginning students whose part time jobs involved working with children (see Table 1). Graduating students would have had more opportunities to make connections with potential employers and would have developed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Beginning Students</th>
<th>Graduating Students</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born in Canada</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as first language</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks multiple languages</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>.694</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended School in Canada</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>.774</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended group childcare</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part time</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother worked outside home</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time job with children*</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous post-secondary*</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male*</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more skills working with children through their field placement experiences in the ECE program.

Third, the proportion of graduating students who had previous post-secondary educational experience was significantly higher than the proportion of beginning students (see Table 1). This is likely because students with PSE are less likely to drop out of programs and more likely to persist to graduation. Data regarding dropout rates and students’ previous postsecondary experiences are not routinely collected by the college but correlation data for 23 community services/health sciences college programs in the same community college revealed that programs with a higher proportion of students with PSE also had higher graduation rates, $r = .43, p < .05$. In light of this finding, comparisons between students with and those without previous post-secondary experience were made in each area of student belief explored in this study.

Finally, the proportion of male beginning students was significantly higher than the proportion of male graduating students (see Table 1). For the beginning cohort the attrition rate for males was 56% (16 males started the program and 9 left the program before graduation) and for the graduating cohort the attrition rate for males was 57% (14 males started the program and 8 left the program before graduation). So, the beginning and graduating cohorts appear representative of the proportion of males who typically begin and graduate from the ECE program. Furthermore, a series of 2 way contingency table analyses confirmed that beginning male students did not differ significantly from graduating male students in terms of demographic variables. In addition, an independent samples $t$ test indicated that beginning male students ($M = 36.81, SD = 8.81$) did not differ significantly from graduating male students ($M = 31.83, SD = 13.96$), $d = 0.43$ in
terms of their memories of biographical parent involvement. Since there is no previous published research evidence to suggest that male ECE students would differ significantly from females on the outcome measures employed in this study and consequently, male participants were included in the analyses.

**Ascribing Excellent Knowledge to Parents and ECEs**

Participants rated the frequency with which parents and ECEs had excellent knowledge of 19 items related to child development and learning. Overall, participants rated ECEs as having excellent knowledge more frequently ($M = 53.10, SD = 6.58$) than they rated parents as having excellent knowledge ($M = 45.73, SD = 7.96$). This was true when the ratings of students who recalled higher or lower biographical parent involvement were selected and their ratings of the frequency of excellent knowledge were analyzed (see Table 2). This was also true when just beginning students’ ratings were selected and examined and when just graduating students ratings were chosen and analyzed (see Table 3). Finally, even participants in the sample who were themselves parents ($N = 29$) rated ECEs ($M = 51.62, SD = 6.62$) as having excellent knowledge more frequently than parents ($M = 40.69, SD = 9.90$).

Comparisons were made on “excellent knowledge” between LPI students and HPI students. The results of these two independent samples $t$ tests indicated that HPI students ascribed significantly higher frequencies of excellent knowledge to both parents and ECEs when compared to LPI students (see Table 2). Participants’ biographical experience of parental involvement (higher versus lower) accounted for only a small proportion (4.8%) of the variance in perceptions of ECE knowledge. However, biographical memories of parent
involvement accounted for a moderate amount (12%) of the variance (Cohen, 1988; 1992) in participants’ perceptions of parent knowledge.

Table 2

Ascribing Knowledge to Parents and ECEs: Students with Average/Below and Above Average Biographical Parent Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower PI</th>
<th>Higher PI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE Knowledge</td>
<td>49.79</td>
<td>7.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Knowledge</td>
<td>39.58</td>
<td>8.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .001

In addition, two independent samples t tests were conducted to find out whether beginning students differed from graduating students in their ratings of parent knowledge and ECE knowledge. Beginning students ascribed significantly higher frequencies of excellent knowledge to both parents and ECEs when compared to graduating students (see Table 3); however, the effect sizes for both comparisons were small (Cohen, 1988; 1992) with participants’ cohort (beginning or graduating students) accounting for only about 1% of the difference in their ratings of parent and ECE knowledge.

Table 3

Ascribing Excellent Knowledge to Parents and ECEs: Beginning Students and Graduating Students Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning Students</th>
<th>Graduating Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE Knowledge</td>
<td>52.24</td>
<td>7.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Knowledge</td>
<td>43.51</td>
<td>8.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .02
Finally, comparisons were also made on “excellent knowledge” between students with previous post-secondary education experience and students who came to the ECE program from high school. These independent sample $t$ tests revealed no differences between students with and without previous post-secondary experience in terms of their ratings of the frequency of parents’ excellent knowledge. These two groups did differ in their ratings of ECEs’ excellent knowledge. Students with previous post-secondary experience ascribed significantly lower frequencies of excellent knowledge to ECEs when compared to their peers without previous post-secondary education experience (see Table 4); however the effect size was small.

**Table 4**  
*Ascribing Knowledge to Parents and ECEs: Students with Previous Post-Secondary Education and Students with High School Only*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Previous Post Secondary</th>
<th>High School Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE Knowledge</td>
<td>49.08</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Knowledge</td>
<td>42.71</td>
<td>9.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .002*

**Parent Involvement**

Independent sample $t$ test comparisons of LPI and HPI students revealed two significant differences. HPI students rated parent involvement activities as more important and themselves as more prepared to engage in parent involvement activities when compared to LPI (see Table 5). Effect sizes, however were small in both cases with levels of
biographical parent involvement accounting for 2.3% of the variance in importance ratings and 6.7% of the variance in level of preparedness ratings.

Table 5

Comparisons of Students who Recalled Higher and Lower Parent Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower PI</th>
<th>Higher PI</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of PI</td>
<td>54.80</td>
<td>57.98</td>
<td>-2.99*</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility of PI</td>
<td>48.80</td>
<td>50.84</td>
<td>-1.72</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness for PI</td>
<td>47.24</td>
<td>54.34</td>
<td>-4.94*</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01

A second set of independent sample t tests revealed that beginning students rated parent involvement activities as significantly less important, less realistic and themselves as less prepared to engage in them when compared to graduating students. Please see Table 6.

The effect sizes were small for feasibility and preparedness with cohort accounting for 2.8% and 7.1% of the variance respectively. The effect size for cohort on ratings of importance was moderate, accounting for 12.8% of the difference.

Table 6

Beginning and Graduating Students’ Ratings of the Importance, Feasibility and Their Level of Preparedness for Parent Involvement Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginning Students</th>
<th>Graduating Students</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of PI</td>
<td>52.58</td>
<td>60.01</td>
<td>-7.53*</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility of PI</td>
<td>48.02</td>
<td>51.74</td>
<td>-3.22*</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness for PI</td>
<td>46.52</td>
<td>53.74</td>
<td>-5.16*</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01
A third set of comparisons were made to control for the larger proportion of students with previous post-secondary education experience in the graduating cohort. There were no significant differences between students with previous post-secondary education and those with high school only in their ratings of the importance, feasibility and their preparedness for family involvement activities.

Participants’ ratings of the feasibility of parent involvement activities were chosen for further analyses because they appeared less vulnerable to social desirability bias when compared with ratings of importance (see measures section). In addition, unlike the ratings for preparedness, ratings for the feasibility of parent involvement activities for both beginning and graduating students as well as for HPI participants and LPI participants were normally distributed and met the homogeneity of variances assumption.

A 2 X 2 ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of two levels of biographical PI (lower and higher) and participants’ cohort in the ECE program (beginning or graduating) on their ratings of the feasibility of parent involvement activities. The means and standard deviations for each group’s feasibility of PI ratings are presented in Table 7. Significant main effects were found for level of biographical PI, $F (1, 353) = 3.79, p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, and cohort, $F (1, 353) = 9.10, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. There were no significant interactions between cohort and level of biographical PI. The level of biographical PI main effect indicated that HPI students rated parent involvement activities as more feasible than LPI students. Although the effect size was small, with biographical PI accounting for only 1% of the variance in feasibility ratings, the association between prior biographical experience and students’ ratings of parent involvement feasibility suggests that prior experiences may exert a very small influence. Participants’ cohort also influenced their
ratings of feasibility. As would be expected graduating students rated parent involvement activities as more feasible than beginning students but again the effect size was small with cohort accounting for only 3% of the variance in feasibility ratings.

### Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Level of Biographical PI</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Students</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>46.26</td>
<td>10.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>49.62</td>
<td>10.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduating Students</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>50.87</td>
<td>11.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>52.10</td>
<td>10.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Barriers to Involvement in Children’ Early Education for Families

Participants were asked to identify barriers families might face that would prevent them from being involved in their children’s’ early education. The barriers they identified were: lack of time, language barriers, lack of confidence, being unaware of the importance of involvement, not making an effort and feeling unwelcome. Lack of time was the most frequently mentioned barrier (70% of participants identified this barrier). Below are some representative comments about the challenges related to the lack of time.

*Time – if parents (families) work or study full time there is little extra time for them to be involved in their child’s early education. The goal would be to provide many, varied opportunities for parent involvement so when they can participate they will.*

*Time- parents work long hours and after work they just want to take their child home.*

*Sometimes parents just don’t have time to be involved in what their kids do every day.*

A series of two-way contingency table analyses were conducted to compare students with average or below average of biographical parent involvement to students who recalled
above average biographical parent involvement in their elementary education. No significant differences were found between these two groups’ perceptions of the barriers families face when trying to be involved in their children’s early education (see Table 8 for summary). In addition, an independent samples $t$ test indicated that LPI students ($M = 1.55$, $SD = .82$) did not describe significantly more barriers to parent involvement $t(349) = .605$, $p = .55$ compared to HPI students ($M = 1.49$, $SD = .80$), $d = .07$.

In contrast, an independent samples $t$ test indicated that graduating students ($M = 1.64$, $SD = .90$) did describe significantly more barriers to parent involvement $t(393) = -3.04$, $p < .01$ compared to beginning students ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .52$), $d = .34$. The effect size was small, however, with cohort accounting for only 2.9% of the variance. In addition, a series of two-way contingency table analyses revealed some significant differences between beginning and graduating students in terms of what they believed the barriers were. A significantly larger proportion of graduating students suggested that parents might be unaware of the importance of being involved, they might lack confidence and they might be made to feel unwelcome. Beginning students were more likely than graduating students to suggest parents might not make an effort to become involved. Table 8 provides a summary of students’ perceptions regarding the barriers families might face.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Lower PI (N =183)</th>
<th>Higher PI (N =168)</th>
<th>Beginning Students (N =169)</th>
<th>Graduating Students (N =198)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Time</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Barriers</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Unaware of Importance</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>27%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Unwelcome</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Confidence</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>12%***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Effort</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $\chi^2$ (1,367) = 4.85, $p = .03$
** $\chi^2$ (1,367) = 9.78, $p = .002$
*** $\chi^2$ (1,367) = 8.92, $p = .003$
**** $\chi^2$ (1,367) = 4.88, $p = .03$

Finally a series of two-way contingency table analyses revealed no significant differences between students with previous postsecondary education and those without previous post-secondary education (high school only) in terms of their perceptions of the barriers to family involvement in children’s early education.

**Discussion**

As expected I found students’ own biographical experiences of parent involvement in their education, and to a lesser extent their previous post-secondary education experience, influenced the beliefs they bring to their professional preparation for work in early childhood. In addition, the findings suggest that there may be support for the influence of the ECE training program. Specifically, participants who recalled higher levels of biographical parent involvement perceived parents as more knowledgeable and parent involvement activities as more important, feasible and themselves as more prepared when compared to participants who recalled lower levels of biographical parental involvement. For the most part the effect
sizes for these associations were small with two exceptions. Participants’ biographical parental involvement accounted for a moderate amount of the variance in ratings of parent knowledge and participants’ cohort accounted for moderate amounts of variance in ratings of the importance of parent involvement activities. My prediction that participants’ who recalled lower levels of biographical parent involvement would identify more barriers to parent involvement was not supported. The following discussion explores how the findings of this study might inform ECE pre-service preparation for working in partnership with families.

**Perceptions of Parents having Less Knowledge than ECEs**

In the present study, students perceived ECEs as more frequently being knowledgeable about child development and learning when compared to parents. This was true for all groups of students examined (beginning, graduating, HPI, LPI, previous post-secondary, high school only, parents). While some groups viewed parents as more knowledgeable than other groups, all groups rated ECEs as more frequently being knowledgeable than parents. While ECEs might know more than many parents about principles of curriculum and child development as a result of their education and experience with a wide variety of children, they would not necessarily know more than parents about individual children’s preferences, developmental histories, and cultural practices. In Graue and Brown’s (2003) study, pre-service teachers conceptualized parent knowledge as highly individualized and teacher knowledge as school based, normative and as carrying more authority. The imbalance in the knowledge ECEs perceive they bring and parents bring to their relationships has the potential to undermine collaboration. Collaboration requires
sharing of resources and knowledge and if parents are viewed as having less expert knowledge and information about their children their status as a collaborative partner could well be diminished in the eyes of the ECE. This perception that parents lack knowledge relative to teachers, and as a result lose status in their relationships with their children’s educators is a phenomenon that has been described in the literature regarding parent-teacher relationships (Bernhard, et. al., 1988; Hujala et. al., 2009; Katz, 1984; Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). The belief, among ECE students surveyed here, that ECEs are more knowledgeable than parents, needs to be explored in greater detail in order to ascertain whether students view parents as less knowledgeable in every area of child development and learning or just in some areas, when compared to ECEs. If parents are perceived to be less knowledgeable in every area of their children’s development and learning, then it is easy to understand how the traditional roles of teacher as “expert advice giver” and parent as less knowledgeable “advice seeker” might continue to be replicated by each graduating class, despite an emphasis on the importance of establishing partnerships with families in pre-service ECE training. ECEs who perceive parents as lacking relevant knowledge will be unlikely to engage them meaningfully in collaborative decision-making.

Perceptions of Family Involvement Activities

HPI students perceived parent involvement activities as more feasible, on average, than their LPI peers. One could argue that an activity perceived as more feasible is more likely to be engaged in than one that is rated less feasible and that this is an indication that these students are more open to utilizing a wide variety of activities that engage parents in their programs. However, Graue & Brown (2003) have argued that students who recall high
levels of family involvement in their early education may also be more inclined to perpetuate the reactive, “teacher as expert” model that requires families to involve themselves in their children’s education at the direction of the teacher and the school. They may be no more inclined to establish truly collaborative relationships than the students who rated the activities as less feasible. In order to better assess students’ openness to collaboration with families a closer examination of the types of activities students typically rate as most feasible is needed. This examination should explore who has authority and control in various family involvement activities and the extent to which ECEs prefer activities that allow them more of both.

Graduating students, on average, gave higher ratings to the importance of a variety of parent involvement activities when compared to beginning students and the ability of cohort to explain the variance in ratings was modest (13% of the variance). It seems reasonable to assume that at least some of this increased awareness and skill development was a result of their ECE training. Yet, it may be that graduating students understand, to a greater extent than beginning students, the social desirability of appearing supportive of family involvement and as a result felt more pressure to provide the “correct” ratings (e.g. all family involvement activities are important). Graduating students may be better versed in the rhetoric of family involvement (Epstein, 2011) but not necessarily more motivated or capable of true collaboration with families. If ratings of the feasibility of family involvement activities were, as hypothesized in the methodology section of this paper, less vulnerable to social desirability influences then it is discouraging that cohort (beginning or graduating) only predicted 3% of the variance in feasibility ratings. The possibility that graduating students have become more familiar with the desirability of collaborating with families but
not particularly well versed in how to realistically make those partnerships happen is worthy of further investigation.

**Perceptions of Barriers to Family Involvement Activities**

Another possible indicator of students’ openness to establishing collaborative relationships with families is their understanding of barriers to family involvement in children’s early education. Graue and Brown (2003) described two images of “problem parents” that pre-service teachers in their study brought to their teacher training. The first was the parent who was over-involved in their children’s education (“those who cared too much” p. 731) and the second was the parent who was completely absent from the parent-teacher relationship (“those who cared too little” p. 731). In the present study beginning students were more likely than graduating students to characterize parents as not making an effort to be involved in their children’s education. Graduating students, in contrast, were more likely to describe multiple barriers to family involvement and acknowledged that parents might be made to feel unwelcome by ECEs. Graduating students appeared more aware of the numerous factors that can contribute to families not being involved in children’s early education including not only time, and language constraints but also being unaware of the importance of their involvement and lacking confidence to engage with ECEs. Finally, graduating students were also more likely than beginning students to describe parents not being made to feel welcome by staff as a barrier to their involvement. This was the only service delivery characteristic identified as a barrier in this study and beginning students were the least likely, of all comparison groups, to mention it. Perhaps training contributed to the graduating students’ insight that ECEs may not make an effort to welcome, and may even
discourage, parental engagement in their programs. Studies of parent-teacher interaction during childcare drop off and pick up routines suggest that very little information is exchanged between parents and teachers during these daily transitions (Endsley & Minnish, 1991; McGrath, 2007; Perlman and Fletcher, 2012). In one study one third of parents and guardians were not even greeted by child care staff during the morning drop-off of their children (Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). It seems reasonable to assume that staff members who do not even offer parents a greeting would probably not be perceived as welcoming by parents and families. In addition to course work, the graduating students in the present study would have had at least four intensive field placement experiences in which they would have observed, first hand, parent and staff behaviour during drop-off and pick-up transitions. Beginning students would probably not have had as much experience in child care centres and would be less aware of how staff behaviour contributes to the creation of a welcoming environment for families.

**Limitations & Conclusions**

The conclusions that can be drawn from this investigation are limited by methodological constraints including the fact that participants were recruited from a single ECE diploma program. The extent to which students in ECE diploma programs at other colleges are similar to students who chose to participate in this study is not known; however all publically funded Ontario community colleges are required to ensure their ECE graduates meet a standard set of vocational outcomes (Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, 2005) in order to receive an Ontario college diploma. Furthermore, the students surveyed in this investigation were demographically similar to pre-service ECE students living in the
greater Golden Horseshoe Region of southern Ontario, an area that grants more than 50% of the ECE diplomas awarded in the province annually (Colleges Ontario, 2012).

Another limitation is the cross sectional design of this study. Beginning students were not followed longitudinally in order to measure changes in their beliefs and so differences observed between the beginning and graduating cohorts may well be due to factors unrelated to the ECE diploma program itself. However, the purpose of the study was to begin to describe the motivations and beliefs of pre-service ECE students in Ontario and to explore the influences of prior experience on perceptions of family involvement. The finding that prior experiences did appear to exert a modest influence on ECE students’ beliefs about their work with families lends additional support to the literature on the importance of students’ prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs on their learning. Finally, the measures used may also have constrained the findings of this study. Although the measures chosen were developed and validated in previous investigations (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown 2003), use of a more nuanced measure of family involvement activities might have allowed for analysis of student preferences for activities based on who set the agenda and was more in control during the interaction (parent versus teacher).

The findings of this investigation suggest while graduating students appeared to have a greater awareness of the importance of family involvement and the barriers to involvement families might face, the influence of their cohort (being a graduating student) accounted for only a small amount of the variance in their ratings of the feasibility of parent involvement activities. As Graue and Brown (2003) point out, if we are not able to provide students with the skills, confidence and opportunities to engage in a variety of collaborative family
involvement activities they will have little to rely on other than their own biographical experiences. Unintentionally we may set ECE graduates up to replicate the status quo. The findings regarding biographical experience suggest that students’ own parents’ involvement in their elementary education exerts a moderate influence on their perceptions of parent knowledge. Students whose own parents were more involved were more likely to perceive parents as more knowledgeable when compared to students whose parents were less involved. This seems inadequate if we are truly committed to supporting collaborative, reciprocal relationships between ECEs and all families. The more we understand about the potential obstacles to the development of these partnerships presumably the better able we will be to help pre-service ECEs articulate and examine their beliefs and prior learning, and increase their motivation, confidence and skills to engage families in the collaborative relationships ECEs regard as so important.
Chapter 3: Ready for Partnerships with Families? ECE Students’ Motivation and Skills

Abstract

Regular communication between parents and child care providers is associated with high quality child care and positive child outcomes (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994). However, several studies have documented low levels of communication between parents and child care providers (Endsley & Minish, 1991; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). Parents often appear to lack information about their children’s care and child care staff report feeling inadequately prepared to work with the diverse and complex families in their communities (Cantin, et al., 2012; Howe, et al., 2013; Reedy & McGrath, 2010). These findings have raised concerns about the extent to which early childhood educators are prepared and motivated to work in partnership with families. This study examined the perceptions of 217 soon-to-graduate ECE students in a two-year diploma program and the perceptions of 30 experienced ECEs for evidence of motivation to work with families, the skills necessary for relationship development and respect for the knowledge and skills parents bring to the partnership. While motivation to work with families was not the participants’ primary incentive to enter the field of early childhood, respondents did describe the qualities and skills necessary for relationship development with families as skills that are important to be an effective ECE. Respect for families was evident in both students’ and experienced ECEs’ descriptions but both groups rated parent knowledge of child development and learning as significantly lower than ECE knowledge.
Introduction

I’m a team member with parents helping with the development of their child. I really try to have as open communication as possible with my parents and feel comfortable. I personally try to find out some things about their life as well as their child just because it gives you an idea, right? You can relate to them, you can ask them how school’s going. You can understand the stresses of their job or how busy it is or you know - to build that relationship. So it’s important to take that time. But I see it as a team you know, because at the end of the day you have their most valuable asset (April, 27 years old, ECE, career length 4 years).

The importance of strong relationships and regular communication between families and child care providers is intuitively appealing. Parents place enormous trust in the people who care for and educate their children and early childhood educators (ECEs) accept a tremendous responsibility to fulfill this role. Of course, parents and ECEs should work together and communicate regularly in order to better understand and support our children and each other. April’s comments above capture the importance of developing and maintaining two-way communication with families that supports sharing information, goals and values and helps to build relationships. There is growing empirical evidence that communication between child care staff and families is associated with high quality child care (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994; Rentzou, 2011; Zellman and Perlman, 2006) and positive outcomes for children (Elicker, Clawson, Hong, Kim, Evangelou & Kontos, 2005; Owen, et al., 2000; Smith & Hubbard, 1988). Margaret Owen and her colleagues (2000) found that more frequent communication between mothers and child care providers was associated with higher quality dyadic interactions (more sensitive, supportive and stimulating) between the caregiver and the child and between the mother and the child even after controlling for mothers’ and caregivers’ childrearing beliefs and education. Owen and her colleagues
(2000) argue that sensitive and responsive caregiving is predicated on understanding the child’s needs and experiences and that caregivers and mothers who regularly exchange information about the child have greater knowledge of the child’s experiences in other settings (home and child care). As a result adults are better equipped to respond to children in an informed, sensitive and supportive manner. Their findings support the idea that communication between the social worlds of the child contributes to more positive socialization processes both in theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 2005) and in practice.

Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems theory provides support for the idea that collaboration among adults in children’s social worlds (e.g. the microsystems of family and child care) enhances development. Human biology and the various social environments in which individuals live exert reciprocal influences and create a series of embedded and interrelated systems, all of which affect development (Bronfenbrenner; 1986; 2005). Strong connections between these systems increase the possibility that information about each setting will be shared with the other settings thereby increasing the potential for the creation of effective learning environments. This idea, that communication between parents and child care providers is related to high quality childcare, is intuitively appealing and has substantial theoretical support along with growing empirical evidence. However, making this type of communication happen in group child care settings appears challenging.

Several studies have documented very low levels of communication between parents and child care staff during the times when parents drop off and pick up their children from child care (Endlsey & Minish, 1991; Perlman & Fletcher, 2012) and other studies have observed that when adults did talk with each other, little relevant information about the child
was exchanged (McBride, et.al, 2002; Rentzou, 2011; Winkelstein, 1981). Of course, these interactions at the beginning and end of the day are not the only opportunities for parents and child care staff to exchange meaningful information about children. More formal parent-teacher meetings, telephone conversations, as well as written and email correspondence all have the potential to contribute to the establishment of mutual understanding. However, several investigations have found that early childhood educators often report feeling inadequately prepared for their work with diverse families (Bernhard, et al., 1988; Cantin, et.al, 2012; McGrath, 2007; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003; Reedy & McGrath, 2010; Rentzou, 2011). In addition, recent findings that Canadian parents often possess incomplete information about their children’s childcare experiences (Howe, et.al, 2013) adds indirect support for the idea that communication between childcare staff and families might be lacking. Investigators have speculated about why caregivers and parents do not appear to share relevant information with each other more often. Among the many potential reasons raised by these investigators two possibilities are relevant here. First, perhaps child care staff members are not motivated to communicate with parents because they prefer working with children. Second, maybe childcare providers do in fact lack the training, skills and abilities needed to regularly engage parents in meaningful communication about their children.

Associations between caregiver-parent communication and high quality care combined with the evidence that communication between childcare staff and parents appears to be lacking have prompted the call for training programs to ensure that early childhood practitioners develop the skills to establish and maintain relationships with diverse families (Connor & Wheeler, 2009; Kernan, 2012; Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Standards for professional child care practice in Canada and throughout the world increasingly require early childhood educators to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with families (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2010; Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Department for Education and Skills 2003; NAEYC, 2008; 2011; OEDC, 2006).

Several pre-requisites for establishing successful partnerships with parents during children’s early years have been documented in the literature. These include organizational factors such as a partnership culture and organizational structures that encourage the development and maintenance of relationships between staff and parents (Douglass, 2011; Douglas & Gitell, 2012; Giallourakisas, Petti-Frontczak & Cook, 2005) as well as factors related to practitioners themselves such as their motivation to engage in partnerships with families, their skills for relationship development and their recognition of parents’ expertise in their own children’s lives (Conner & Wheeler, 2006; Elicker, Noppe, Noppe, & Fortner-Wood, 1997; Kernan, 2012; Prott & Hautumm, 2004).

Clearly the responsibility for the development of early childhood practitioners’ willingness to collaborate with families, their respect for parents’ expertise and the skills necessary to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships falls, at least initially, to pre-service early childhood education (ECE) training programs. ECE training programs in Canada are guided by national training standards (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2010), which include the requirement that graduates can work in collaborative partnerships with families. Nevertheless, we know very little about how successful these programs are at preparing graduates to achieve this occupational standard. The study
reported here set out to investigate pre-service ECE students’ motivations and conceptualizations of an effective ECE and explore their descriptions for evidence of the motivation, skills and respect needed to establish collaborative relationships with families. The focus here was on exploring the extent to which three pre-requisites for establishing partnerships with families (motivation to engage in partnerships, skills for developing relationships and respect for parents’ knowledge) were part of soon-to-graduate ECE students’ descriptions of their own motivation to enter the field, their conceptualizations of the qualities and characteristics of an effective early childhood educator and their ratings of parent and ECE knowledge.

Conventional wisdom suggests that ECE students are attracted to the field because of their love of children, not because they want to work with families. However, we know very little about the motivations of individuals who choose a career in the field of early childhood. To what extent does the prospect of working collaboratively with families motivate individuals to enter the field of early childhood? In terms of the skills or qualities required to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with families, there is surprisingly little empirical research to support the association between specific child care provider characteristics and the quality of their relationships with parents (Cantin et. al., 2012; Powell, 2003). Studies conducted to date have primarily employed self-report measures involving comparisons of parent and child care staff satisfaction with their relationships (Cantin et. al., 2012, Elicker, et. al, 1997; Swick & McKnight, 1989). Parents themselves reported that they are looking for child care providers who are confident, trustworthy, friendly, knowledgeable, collaborative, empathetic and who understand families’ lives (Connor & Wheeler, 2009; Elicker, et al., 1997; Moran, Ghathe, & van der Merwe, 2004). Even in the absence of
empirical data correlating specific child care provider qualities and characteristics with more collaborative and effective relationships with parents it still seems worthwhile to know if early childhood educators value the qualities parents appear to want. Do pre-service ECE students identify these qualities among those that make an early childhood educator most effective? Finally, an obstacle preventing true collaborative relationships between educators and families is the “expert” model of the early childhood educator which assumes that educators have much knowledge and parents have relatively little expertise (Hujala, et al., 2010). Lillian Katz (1984), in her description and analysis of the differing tendencies of mothers and teachers in their frequently overlapping roles, identified several sources of conflict not the least of which is the teacher taking the role of a professional with more knowledge than the parent. There appears to be some observational evidence to support the idea that early childhood educators might perceive their professional role as conferring more knowledge about children than parents. For instance, Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011) analyzed the advice giving in early childhood parent-teacher conferences and discovered that teachers were almost exclusively advice givers and parents were advice seekers. They argued that in these socially constructed roles teachers’ knowledge is acknowledged while parents’ expertise goes unrecognized. Others have argued that these traditional roles create interactions in which teachers control the agenda and parents often feel powerless (Bernhard, et al., 1988). Respecting parents’ expertise in their child’s lives involves recognizing the knowledge they bring to the partnership. What knowledge do ECE students think parents and ECEs each bring to their partnerships?

In addition to comparing the students’ responses to the literature about effective partnerships with parents, a small and select group of experienced ECEs, all with the same
educational credentials as the soon-to-graduate students, completed the same measures and a subsample of those surveyed also provided follow-up face to face interviews to describe, in more detail, their work with families and the skills required.

Method

Participants

Pre-service ECE students. This study involved 217 graduating students enrolled in a two-year ECE diploma program at a community college in a large urban area in southern Ontario, Canada. The sampling frame included all graduating students attending class in the final week of the program. Eighty four percent of the graduating cohort participated in the study. Students who did not participate may have been absent from class during the data collection period or may have chosen not to participate. The majority of graduating students were female (97%), born in Canada (68%), and spoke English as their first language (68%). They ranged in age from 18 to 44 years of age with a mean age of 23 years and 8% of the sample were parents. Graduating students were given class time to complete the survey, if they chose to participate. No identifying information was collected for this group.

Experienced ECEs. A targeted, convenience sample of 30 experienced ECEs was also surveyed. Experienced ECEs were recruited by the investigator through informal professional networks. Participants were identified by their supervisors and/or college faculty members as practitioners who were highly skilled at connecting with families and all had worked in the field for 4 years or more. The majority of experienced ECEs were female (97%), born in Canada (70%), and spoke English as their first language (87%). They ranged in age from 23 to 47 years of age with a mean age of 38 years and 50% were parents. They
were approached via email with a description of the study and an invitation to complete a written survey and participate in a short face to face interview. All 30 participants initially approached agreed to complete the written survey, which was the same survey completed by the graduating students.

Twenty one of the experienced ECEs agreed to participate in individual, semi-structured interviews that were recorded and later transcribed. Twelve of the interviewees were working with infants, toddlers or preschoolers and 9 interviewees worked with kindergarten or school aged children. The interviews ranged in length from 10 to 24 minutes and consisted of 8 questions, two of which were related to working with families and are reported on here. Although the group of 21 interviewees was purely a convenience sample, they were demographically similar in many ways to the 3,480 early childhood practitioners surveyed by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (2012) about wages, working conditions, and human resource issues in regulated child care centres in across all ten provinces and two territories in Canada. Table 9 summarizes the demographic data for both groups. This national survey did not purport to be a representative sample of all child care employees in Canada due to several methodological challenges but at least it appears to be a representative sample of people working in childcare who are willing and able to participate in research surveys. In the absence of a published description of a truly representative sample it is somewhat reassuring that the convenience sample in this study was demographically similar to a much larger sample of child care employees in Canada.

A larger proportion of participants in this study had an ECE diploma compared to the national sample; however they were chosen specifically because they had completed the same type of pre-service preparation as the ECE student participants. In addition, the
proportion of staff from non-profit centres that hosted ECE students completing field placements was also higher than the national survey average, but again, these characteristics were deliberately chosen because I wanted to gather insights of similarly educated, experienced ECEs who mentor ECE students in high quality child care programs. There is evidence that non-profit centres tend to be of higher quality than for profit centres (Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman & LaGrange, 2006).

Table 9
Comparison of Demographic Data for Interviewees & Sector Council Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Characteristics</th>
<th>Current Study (N = 21)</th>
<th>CCHRSC 2012 (N = 3,480)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>38 years</td>
<td>38 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 30 years of age</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Career Length</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Canada</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English was first language</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE Diploma</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Centre Characteristics:
- Non-profit centres 100% 73%
- Centres in which ECE students regularly completed field placements 100% 69%
- Centres that provide school age care in addition to full day care 43% 47%
Measures

All participants were asked to complete a written survey that included several rating scales and open ended questions that are reported elsewhere (Winder, 2013; Winder & Corter, in press). The following two open ended questions were directly related to motivation and skills, which is the focus here:

1. What attracted you to the field of early childhood?

2. In your opinion, what qualities and characteristics make an early childhood educator most effective?

Two scales (one to rate parents and one to rate ECEs) were used to assess participants’ ratings of the knowledge of child development and learning that parents and ECEs bring to their relationships with each other. Participants were required to rate the frequency with which both parents and ECEs had excellent knowledge in 16 areas of child development and learning (e.g. “ways child learns best”, “developmental history”, “disposition”, “socio-emotional needs”, etc.). The rating scale consisted of 5 points (0 = never; 1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = frequently; 4 = always). These scales were developed by Graue and Brown (2003) for their investigation into pre-service teachers’ beliefs about families and school. They were expanded from 3 points (1 = rarely; 2 = frequently; 3 = always) to the 5 points described above in order to create a more balanced scale and to increase the potential for variability in participants’ responses. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale involving ratings of parent knowledge was .92 and the alpha for the scale involving ratings of ECE knowledge was also .92.

In addition, in follow-up interviews the experienced ECEs were asked the following questions during the semi-structured interviews:
1. How would you describe your job in relation to parents?

2. What are the most important skills for working with parents?

**Open Ended Questions, Coding and Inter-rater Reliability**

The thematic analysis employed in this study involved an open-coding technique, which required the constant comparison of participants’ responses in order for categories to emerge (Creswell, 2013; Glaser, 1978; 1992; Kelle, 2005). The intent was to authentically capture each participant’s meaning. The first round of open-coding involved a selection (at random) of 100 participants’ responses. Tentative categories of response were identified and modified based on these 100 participants’ responses. The next step involved coding all participants’ answers using the tentative categories. When an individual participant’s response did not fit into the existing coding scheme a new category of response was created and previous responses were reviewed in order to determine whether the new response category was a better match for any previously coded answers. Once this focused-coding (Van den Hoonard, 2012) was complete and each category of response clearly defined, a research assistant, with no background in early childhood education, or awareness of the intent of the study, then coded a random sample of 125 respondents’ answers (51% of the total). The percentage of agreement between the two coders ranged from 97% to 100% and kappa ranged from .91 at the lowest to 1 at the highest. These kappa values indicate high levels of agreement between raters (Kottner, et.al, 2011).
Results

Attraction to the Field of Early Childhood: Motivation to Collaborate with Families

The most frequently cited reason for attraction to the field of early childhood for both graduating ECE students and experienced ECEs was enjoyment of children (see Table 10).

*I love working and spending time with children. I can’t imagine myself doing anything else.*

*I’ve always enjoyed working with children and have always wanted to understand how they develop.*

*I love children and the joy they bring and how they find joy in little things every day.*

The second most frequent reason given for being attracted to the field of early childhood was to have an impact in the lives of children.

*The early years are such a growing period in which so much learning and development takes place. I wanted to be a part of that.*

*I wanted to help future generations believe in themselves and instill self-respect and confidence at an early age.*

The least frequently cited reason for being attracted to the field of early childhood was to work with families. Only three respondents across the two samples (2 graduating students and 1 experienced ECE) mentioned families in their descriptions of their attraction to the field. Here are their answers:

*I wanted to work with children, their families and their communities.*

*I have always wanted to work with families and children.*

*The primary point that attracted me to early childhood field is providing community service to families and children by supporting early learning as well as providing a safe environment.*
Table 10

*Participants’ Reasons for Being Attracted to the Field of Early Childhood*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Attraction</th>
<th>Experienced ECEs (N = 30)</th>
<th>Graduating Students (N = 209)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of children</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make a difference</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career related</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use skills</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn parenting</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told good with kids</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To support families</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Characteristics of an Effective ECE: Skills to Establish Relationships with Families**

Participants’ were asked to describe the qualities or characteristics that make an effective ECE. A summary of all the qualities described is presented in Table 11.

Compassion and enthusiasm were the two most frequently cited qualities of an effective ECE by both groups. Compassion included empathy, kindness, love, genuine concern and caring for others. Enthusiasm included being energetic, fun loving, friendly and having a positive demeanor and a passion and love for the work. The quotes below are examples of what graduating students said regarding compassion and enthusiasm.

*The quality that makes an ECE most effective is the way they interact with children and respond to parents with kindness, consideration and generosity.*

*Compassion, integrity and respect for children and families.*

*Personally I believe that enthusiasm and encouragement are important.*

*Having high spirits and enthusiasm.*

*The qualities and characteristics that I think make an ECE most effective is that they genuinely love the job, are comforting, have good patience, full of energy, very sociable and nurturing.*

*Providing constant concern and love to children promotes humanity.*
### Table 11

**Qualities that Make an Effective ECE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Experienced ECEs (N =30)</th>
<th>Graduating Students (N =205)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>60%</strong></td>
<td><strong>39%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respect for others</strong>**</td>
<td><strong>40%</strong></td>
<td><strong>18%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An open mind</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>30%</strong></td>
<td><strong>11%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to work in a team****</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization skills</strong>**</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Knowledge $\chi^2 (1, N = 235) = 4.74, p = .03$

**Respect $\chi^2 (1, N = 235) = 8.12, p = .004$

***Flexibility $\chi^2 (1, N = 235) = 7.85, p = .01$ Fisher’s Exact Test, 2 sided

****Team Player $\chi^2 (1, N = 235) = 24.27, p = .000$ Fisher’s Exact Test, 2 sided

*****Organized $\chi^2 (1, N = 235) = 14.80, p = .001$ Fisher’s Exact Test, 2 sided

The next most frequently described abilities were communication skills and knowledge.

Examples of participants’ comments regarding knowledge were:

*They need to know how to provide engaging, enriched environments for learning.*

*ECEs bring the magic to learning.*

*Knowledge to help and support children, families and communities in a respectful manner.*

Examples of participants’ comments regarding communication:

*I believe an ECE needs to have interpersonal communication skills to establish positive relationships with families and children.*

*I think you need to be a good observer and a good listener.*
A series of 2 way contingency table analyses were conducted to investigate whether graduating students and experienced ECEs differed in their descriptions of the skills needed to be an effective ECE (see Table 3). Experienced ECEs were significantly more likely than the graduating students to describe knowledge, respect for others, flexibility, the ability to work in a team and organizational skills as important.

**Experienced ECEs’ Descriptions of their Role & Skills in Relation to Parents**

During the follow-up interviews, experienced ECEs were asked to describe their job in relation to parents. Communication was identified by all participants (see Table 12).

**Table 12**  
*Experienced ECEs’ Descriptions of their Role in Relation to Parents*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptors</th>
<th>All Participants (N = 21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving information</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting information</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing relationships with families</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below are two comments that capture some of the most salient features of the job of working with families, as described by the experienced ECEs.

*I think it’s a give and take with the parents that we have here. I think often parents come to us when they’re unsure of what’s appropriate or ‘What should my child be doing right now? Or I’m seeing this at home, do you think this is okay? I’ve had this problem, do you have any suggestions or strategies?’ for behaviour, these kinds of things. But then I also go to parents when I need, you know, suggestions on curriculum or ‘What did you do this weekend? How can I tie it into the curriculum?’*

*It’s a very important role that you play as an ECE. You’re the connection; your relationship with the parents is a connection. It’s the stepping stone between you and the child, and their home life. It’s very important to have good communication between yourself and the parents and to develop a positive relationship.*
In addition, during the follow-up interviews, experienced ECEs were asked to identify the most important skills needed to work with parents. The most commonly described skills were communication skills, having an open mind, being warm, welcoming and friendly, being empathic, compassionate and sensitive and being confident and outgoing (see Table 13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptors</th>
<th>All Participants (N = 21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective Communicator</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open minded</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming/friendly</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonally skilled (e.g. non-defensive, sociable, calm)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic /compassionate/sensitive</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident/outgoing</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful of others</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Listener</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful/creative/problem solver</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their comments provided greater insight into why they believed these skills and abilities are necessary for the development of collaborative relationships with parents.

*I think being open and receptive to the ideas of parents and being respectful of them and their home [are the most important skills]. Recognizing them as an expert on their child. I know some people who work at other centers who don’t value the parents coming in and they have said, “We don’t like it when the parents come into the program. It’s so disruptive.” So it’s really recognizing how much parents have to contribute and share with us about their own child.*

*Being non-judgmental and being open-minded in general. Understanding that there is more than one, one way to get...to a final point. And having the respect for it, not just understanding it but actually respecting like that’s their choice and this is their child. Also being compassionate to the fact that you know I’ve had parents tell me in the past sometimes that they think that we spend more time with their child than they do and that can be really sensitive to a parent. So knowing that they have a much bigger*
picture in their mind of an entire lifetime that they’re taking care of this child where you know we get them for a year, year and a half, two years. So being compassionate to that and understanding that. You want to give them as much information about their child’s day as you can. Then you can take the other half and relate what you’re seeing back to what’s going on at home. But knowing that these things can be really sensitive. I think is very important to be sensitive to parents.

Warmth, I find that warmth compassion, definitely being open-minded, and really just responsive to what parents need to share, and of course that comes into the communication factor. So there’s a lot of excellent ways to communicate with families whether it’s verbally or non-verbally. I think patience is definitely an attribute as well, along with just being an effective listener and really trying to tune into the shared awareness and understanding of how the parents would like us to support the child.

Always acknowledging. That acknowledgement I think is so important because as much as they always want to know how the child’s day was or we want to know how the child’s night was, it’s just as important to say, “How was your day? How was your morning? How was your work day?” I think that’s really important to connect to them too because there are days we all have stress or personal anxieties that could affect us so acknowledging that they’re just as important as their child is to us is very important.

Ascribing Knowledge to Parents and ECEs: Respect for Parents

Participants rated the frequency with which parents and ECEs had excellent knowledge of 19 items related to child development and learning (see Table 14). A paired samples t test indicated that students rated ECEs ($M = 50.46$, $SE = .55$) as having excellent knowledge more frequently than parents ($M = 41.58$, $SE = .63$), $t (192) = -13.73, p < .000, r = .70$. Similarly, in a second paired samples t test experienced ECEs also rated ECEs ($M = 49.59$, $SE = 1.53$) as having excellent knowledge more frequently than parents ($M = 42.70$, $SE= 1.39$), $t (26) = -3.22, p < .003, r = .53$. The only item for which students rated parents as more frequently having excellent knowledge compared to ECEs was “family and cultural practices”. Experienced ECEs also rated parents as more frequently having excellent knowledge of “family and cultural practices” as well as “developmental history”.

Table 14
Ascribing Knowledge to ECEs and Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Area</th>
<th>Experienced ECEs</th>
<th>Graduating Students</th>
<th>Experienced ECEs</th>
<th>Graduating Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best strategies to support learning</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.669</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways to deal with learning problems</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.640</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s functioning in a group</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement compared to others</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning goals</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.660</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social development</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.583</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way child learns best</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School expectations</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional needs</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.765</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relationships</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic strengths</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.718</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical skills</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.531</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>.640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental history</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cultural practices</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49.59</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.97</strong></td>
<td><strong>50.46</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.67</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Question Framing: Parents and teachers have unique knowledge about children. Please rate how often early childhood educators have excellent knowledge in the following areas. Please circle the number that best reflects your opinion. (0 = Never, 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Frequently; 4 = Always). Question was repeated and in the second instance participants rated parents.

Table is sorted by experienced ECEs’ ratings of parents’ knowledge. The topics that parents were rated as least frequently having knowledge of are at the top and topics they were rated as most frequently having knowledge at the bottom of the table.
Discussion

Motivation to Collaborate with Families

Most ECE students surveyed here were attracted to the field by their love of children. Their experiences with children support their desire to enter ECE training and many hope to make a difference in children’s lives and advance their careers through their training. Very few (only 2 of 209) of the students surveyed mentioned working with families as something that attracted them to the field. The experienced ECEs interviewed for this study were no more likely to identify a desire to support families than pre-service ECE students. The enjoyment of and respect for children are very important motivations for working in jobs that involve long periods interacting with young children and supporting their development. It seems reasonable to assume that most, if not all, parents want their children’s educators to enjoy working with their children. In fact, McGrath (2007) reported that the quality of the teacher-child relationship is possibly the most important aspect of childcare for parents. Mothers in her study valued their child’s relationship with the teachers above their own relationships with the teachers. However, as Powell (1998) points out, what appears to be missing from commonly held perceptions of the early childhood field is that early childhood programs actually serve families and not just children. The misconception that ECEs need only work with children is probably borne out of several factors, one of which may be the way in which we conceptualize caring and educating young children as series of discrete, dyadic relationships (e.g. mother-child, ECE-child, teacher-child) rather than picturing a more ecologically based system (Lerner, Rothbaum, Boulos & Castellino, 2002; Pelletier & Corter, 2004). Those who have been trained in systems theory, such as social workers, and
staff in early intervention programs may be less vulnerable to this “relay race” conceptualization of services for young children but it is more probable that the professional identification of ECEs, working in childcare settings for typically developing children, is more closely aligned with that of teachers rather than social service providers. Teaching is often conceptualized as a job that primarily involves working directly with children and not necessarily with families (Epstein, 2011; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003). In any case, the motivation to create partnerships with families does not appear to be something individuals bring with them to their ECE training; rather it is something that needs to be cultivated during their professional training. Somewhat surprisingly, for the participants studied here neither the experience of being parented nor being a parent themselves was sufficient to raise the salience of the ECE’s role in relation to families enough for them to mention it when they were describing their own motivation to enter the field. Perhaps exploring ECE students’ conceptualizations of their anticipated roles (in relation to parents, children, colleagues and their communities) at the outset of their training would help us better understand their pre-existing motivations and help us to utilize a variety of incentives that might better support the development of a more bio-ecologically systems based view of children, families and communities along with the development of the skills necessary to reach out and collaborate with families in ways both experienced ECEs and parents themselves have described as beneficial.

Qualities and Characteristics that Contribute to Collaboration with Families

Although virtually none of the participants included in this study were attracted to the field of ECE in order to work with families, they certainly described characteristics and
qualities of an effective ECE that could support collaborative relationships with families. Compassion was the most frequently cited characteristic by all participants in the study and the empathy, kindness, consideration and generosity it entails was something many participants extended not just to children but also to families. Building trust is central to establishing collaborative relationships with families (Keyes, 2002; McGrath, 2007; Rose & Elicker, 2008; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006) and approaching families with consideration and kindness supports the development of trust. In addition, while these qualities are essential for designing and implementing early childhood curriculum, they also go a long way in establishing collaborative relationships with families (Wilson, 2010).

Communication was identified by all the experienced ECEs as an important part of their role with parents and communication skills were also identified by 44% of the graduating ECE students as a quality that makes an affective ECE. Although less than half of the graduating students identified communication it was still the third most frequently cited quality or characteristic of an effective ECE (just after compassion and enthusiasm). It may be that ECEs develop a greater appreciation for the importance of communication, particularly as it relates to relationships with parents, as they gain more experience in the job. During their interviews, more than one of the experienced ECEs made it clear that necessity dramatically increases the motivation to develop these skills. In a number of studies parents themselves have identified communication among the skills they value most in their child care providers (Elicker, et.al, 1997; Keyes, 2002; Knopf & Swick, 2007; Swick, 2004). In these same investigations parents have also identified that they want someone who respects them and takes a collaborative approach. In this study, respect for others was mentioned significantly more frequently by experienced ECEs as was the ability to work in a team.
Respect for others and the ability to give and take information and work collaboratively with families were integral to experienced ECEs’ work with families but pre-service students appeared to be much less aware of the importance of these qualities or characteristics. Douglass and Gittell (2012) have argued that compassion without equality has the potential to produce paternalistic types of helping behaviour rather than partnerships. This is the idea that child care providers are doing things for parents rather than with them. Although the interviews with experienced ECEs in this study definitely captured a partnership orientation and spirit of respect and collaboration, rather than a tendency towards “charity” or paternalism, both experienced ECEs and pre-service students rated parents as less frequently possessing excellent knowledge of child development and learning compared to themselves.

Respect for Parents’ Knowledge and Skills

A potential obstacle to collaboration between families and educators is tension in the overlapping responsibilities of parents and teachers. While these shared responsibilities provide the impetus for collaboration (Epstein, 2011; Epstein, 1995) they are also a potential source of conflict (Bernhard, et.al., 1988; Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Katz, 1984). In the present study all participants perceived ECEs as more frequently being knowledgeable about almost all aspects of child development and learning when compared to parents. This view of parents as significantly less knowledgeable than ECEs quite possibly creates a challenge to the formation of collaborative partnerships with parents. Graduating students perceived parents as less knowledgeable in every area of their children’s development and learning, except family and cultural practices. Similarly, even experienced ECEs rated parents as less knowledgeable than ECEs in all but two areas: family and cultural practices and
developmental history. Given their education and experience ECEs often may know more than many parents about many aspects of child development and curriculum, and parents themselves have identified that they want knowledgeable child care providers (Rose & Elicker, 2008). However, parents also want childcare providers who respect their expertise in their own children’s lives (Conner & Wheeler, 2006; Kernan, 2012; Prott & Hautumm, 2004) and it is difficult to make a case for ECEs knowing more about an individual child’s developmental history than their parents. In addition, most parents observe and interact with their children in a much wider variety of situations than do ECEs (e.g. doctor appointments, family get-togethers, shopping trips, children’s illnesses, outdoor outings, dealing with night time fears, travelling in cars or on public transportation) so it seems reasonable that many parents would have at least comparable knowledge to ECEs about their child’s disposition and social emotional needs if not other areas of development. Yet, on average, both graduating students and experienced ECEs did not perceive it that way. This perception of ECEs as more knowledgeable than parents probably underpins and perpetuates the traditional roles of teacher as “expert advice giver” and parent as less knowledgeable “advice seeker” and has the potential to undermine the establishment of partnerships with families. ECEs who perceive parents as lacking relevant knowledge will be unlikely to involve them meaningfully in collaborative decision-making nor recognize their expertise in their own children’s lives. In Graue and Brown’s (2003) study, where the rating scale of parent and teacher knowledge that was used in this study was first employed, teachers rated parents as more knowledgeable in five areas. These included children’s socio-emotional needs, disposition, and physical skills as well as developmental history and family cultural practices. However, Graue and Brown’s (2003) sample included 55 pre-service secondary school
teachers along with 75 pre-service elementary teachers. Secondary school teachers enter children’s lives much later and have much more circumscribed access to information about children when compared to ECEs who enter children’s lives early and have access to information about most aspects of development. It is possible that the ratings of pre-service secondary school teachers positively influenced Graue and Brown’s (2003) finding of parents being rated as more frequently knowledgeable about more areas of children’s development when compared to the ECE ratings of parent knowledge in this study. In addition, it is quite possible that the measure of parent and ECE knowledge used in this study did not adequately capture the areas of knowledge and expertise that ECEs perceive parents as possessing about young children. The measure employed focused on general aspects of development and learning may not have captured the unique aspects of individual children’s learning and development that ECEs might perceive parents as knowing more about than themselves. Nevertheless it remains unclear what specific knowledge ECEs think parents bring to the partnership.

Limitations & Conclusions

This investigation is limited by the samples studied. First, the graduating students surveyed all attended an ECE program at a single community college in southern Ontario. However, the demographics of this sample were similar to those of students at other colleges in the region and this part of the province grants more than 50% of the ECE diplomas in the province annually (Colleges Ontario, 2012). In addition, the curriculum offered by all ECE diploma granting colleges in Ontario must adhere to a set of vocational learning outcomes and these require that students learn to establish and maintain responsive relationships with
families (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2012). Second, the experienced ECEs surveyed and interviewed were a convenience sample. However, as pointed out earlier in this paper they were very similar to the national sample of ECEs surveyed Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (2012). The main exception was their higher levels of education compared to the national sample. Experienced ECEs with a 2 year diploma were specifically selected in order to ensure that they had the same training as the graduating students. While this national survey has also been criticized for not being representative of childcare providers in Canada it is the best we currently have. Another potential criticism of this study is the indirect nature of some of the questions posed. Participants were asked to describe the characteristics or qualities of an effective ECE generally, not in relation to their work with parents. Similarly, they were asked about their primary reasons for entering the field and not their specific motivations in relation to working with families. Given the socially desirability inherent in the concept of parent involvement in education generally (Epstein, 2011) participants’ general responses were examined for evidence of motivation and skills to work with families rather than for testimonies on the importance of families.

Despite these considerations, this study represents a first step towards better understanding the extent to which early childhood education diploma program graduates are motivated to work with families, the skills and qualities they value in an early childhood educator and the knowledge they believe parents and ECEs bring to their partnerships. It raises questions about ECE students’ perceptions of their own knowledge relative to that of parents and how those perceptions might affect the reciprocity and respect required for true partnerships. It seems clear that pre-service ECE diploma programs need to explore ways to enhance students’ motivation to work in partnership with families and increase their
appreciation for parents’ knowledge about their children in a variety of contexts and over the course of a much longer period of development. As one of the experienced ECEs interviewed in this study pointed out, knowing that parents have a much bigger picture in their minds of an entire lifetime that they are taking care of their children often increases one’s respect, compassion and admiration for parents. Ideally the motivation to work in partnership with families would come from a more nuanced understanding of child development and the role of childcare within the context of a bio-ecologically systems based view of children, families and communities. It makes sense to introduce this perspective early in pre-service ECE curriculum and embed further learning in this context in order to help students appreciate that in order to be most effective in their interactions with the children they must engage families and understand and connect with communities. Pre-service ECE students and experienced ECEs alike enter the field with a strong desire to work with children. When they understand how their collaboration with families and communities helps to strengthen their effectiveness with the children, they are probably more motivated to work on developing those vital relationships with families. The qualities and skills these students and experienced ECEs value, such as compassion, enthusiasm, knowledge and communication skills, appear to be very helpful in this endeavour. It is incumbent on pre-service ECE preparation programs to help students develop this larger view of their role in the lives of children and families and thereby increase their motivation. In addition, programs must support them in developing the necessary confidence and skills for this fundamental component of their role as ECEs.
Chapter 4: General Concluding Comment

The principle objective of the two investigations reported here was to describe pre-service and experienced ECEs’ motivations and perceptions of their work or anticipated work with families. The findings provided much needed awareness of the motivation and beliefs pre-service ECEs bring with them to their professional education and the extent to which their prior experiences appear to influence those views. In addition, these investigations documented first hand descriptions of highly skilled, experienced ECEs’ conceptualizations of their work with families. Canadian ECEs’ descriptions of their work with families are not prevalent in the current literature and the findings of these investigations not only contribute to our understanding of ECEs’ and their work with families but can be used to inform pre-service ECE preparation programs. This final chapter provides a brief synthesis of the findings from both investigations. The findings are organized in terms of their implications for the content and delivery of pre-service ECE preparation programs and further research endeavors.

Recognize Students’ Pre-existing Beliefs about ECEs and Families

Like pre-service teachers (Graue & Brown, 2003), pre-service ECEs in this study came to their professional education with perceptions of parents that were related to their own biographical memories. Students who recalled their own families as being less actively involved in their early education perceived parents as less knowledgeable than students who recalled higher levels of family engagement, regardless of whether they were beginning students or graduating students. Unless such assumptions are acknowledged and discussed
there is a high probability that they will remain unchanged (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003). This leaves graduating students vulnerable to replicating the status quo, in terms of their perceptions of parents and what parents bring to collaborative relationships. This is of particular concern in light to the finding from the second study that graduating pre-service ECE students viewed ECEs as more knowledgeable than parents about almost every aspect of child development and learning. Without diminishing students’ pride in the knowledge and skills they are acquiring during their professional education, pre-service programs need to ensure that students understand that knowledge can take various forms. Parents spend considerably more time with their children than ECEs and they experience their children in a wider variety of contexts. As a result of their experiences with their children, over a lifetime, they too have valuable information about their children to share.

Cultivate ECEs’ Motivation to Collaborate with Families

While it is not surprising that ECEs surveyed in these investigations were primarily motivated to enter the field because of their enjoyment of children, it is somewhat unexpected that so very few of the participants even mentioned families when they described their attraction to the field. As noted in the second study, neither the experience of being parented or nor being parents themselves was enough to raise the prominence of families in participants’ descriptions of their attraction to the field of early childhood. This suggests that working with families is at best a less salient part of the role for prospective ECEs or at worst an unattractive aspect of the work of an ECE. This is a question worthy of further exploration. In either case, the motivation to engage families in partnerships is not something individuals bring with them but something that pre-service programs must
cultivate. If students want to work effectively with children and make a difference in children’s lives then it seems reasonable to suppose that they will engage in activities that they clearly see as serving that purpose, including engaging in collaborative relationships with families. Pre-service ECE programs would be wise to tap into students’ existing motivation to work effectively with children to help them to embrace a broader conceptualization of their role as an ECE and the skills they need to be effective. In order to be most effective in providing sensitive, responsive and stimulating care to children ECEs need to view children in the larger context of the multiple environments in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 2005; Owen et al., 2000). As one of the experienced ECEs in this study explained, ECEs need to see themselves as the “connection” and a “stepping stone” between the childcare setting and the home.

**Broaden ECEs Ideas About Their Role and Required Skills**

The idea that pre-service ECEs need to be helped to expand their conceptualizations of child development and their role as ECEs is further supported by findings from the second study regarding the qualities and characteristics they identified as making an ECE most effective. Compared to graduating students, experienced ECEs appeared to have a more multifaceted view of the skills required to be an effective ECE. Experienced ECEs’ descriptions of the qualities and characteristics required to be effective ECE included skills needed for work with a variety of adults (e.g. respect for others, flexibility, teamwork) in addition to skills needed to work effectively with children (e.g. compassion, enthusiasm). In contrast, despite their experience in the pre-service preparation program, graduating students’ descriptions focused on skills more directly related to working with children and although
they extended their compassion to families they were significantly less likely than their experienced comparators to identify respect for others, flexibility and teamwork as important qualities. In addition, the experienced ECEs interviewed for this investigation echoed published reports that describe qualities parents themselves value in their children’s caregivers. The top skills these accomplished ECEs identified as most important in their work with families included communication skills, an open mind, a welcoming personality, interpersonal skills, compassion and confidence. As was pointed out in the discussion section of the second study, these skills have also been identified by parents themselves as qualities they value in their children’s caregivers (Connor & Wheeler, 2009; Elicker et al., 1997; Moran et al., 2004). When ECEs better understand the interconnectedness of children, families, and communities, as evidenced in the descriptions experienced ECEs provided about their role with families, their conceptualizations of their role and the skills necessary to be effective appear to be more multifaceted. Pre-service ECE preparation programs need to help students gain this larger perspective and this more nuanced view of their role before they enter the field. There is work to be done to determine the most effective ways to do this.

Develop Student Confidence and Skills to Engage Parents in Partnerships

The expansion of students’ view of the ECE role to encompass not only work with children but work with families, colleagues and communities needs to be accompanied by the development of the confidence and skills necessary to engage with adults. In the first investigation reported here, graduating students were more likely than beginning students to endorse the importance of a variety of family involvement activities but these cohort differences did not explain much of the variance between beginning and graduating students’
ratings of the feasibility of these activities or their level of preparedness to engage in them. It is possible that the students’ pre-service preparation raised their awareness of the importance of family involvement activities but did not help them develop implementation strategies or increase their confidence in their abilities to interact with families. Alternately, as suggested in the first study, graduating students may just be more proficient than beginning students in the rhetoric of family involvement (Epstein, 2011). In either case these findings point to the need to better understand why significantly more graduating students did not perceive family involvement activities as more feasible and themselves as better prepared for them than beginning students.

**Limitations Revisited and General Conclusion**

The studies reported in this dissertation provided evidence that, like pre-service teachers, pre-service ECEs come to their professional education with ideas about what parents know and these ideas are informed, to some extent, by their own recollections of biographical experiences of family involvement in their elementary education. The majority of individuals surveyed here were attracted to the field of early childhood because they enjoyed working with children not necessarily because they had an interest in supporting families. Experienced ECEs described the importance of establishing partnerships with families as a way to be more effective in supporting children’s development but there was little evidence to suggest that pre-service ECE students shared this conviction. The study was limited by the cross sectional design that precluded any conclusions about graduating students differing from beginning students solely as a result of the pre-service ECE program. Similarly, sample limitations included the pre-service students all being drawn from a single
diploma program and the experienced ECEs being a convenience sample. These limitations along with issues related to specific measures used have been addressed in greater detail in the previous chapters. Despite these limitations these two investigations add to our understanding of the influence of prior experiences on educator perceptions and provide insight into their motivations and perceptions of their role. The findings also point to the importance of helping ECE students appreciate the interconnectedness of children, families and communities by providing them with a bio-ecological framework for understanding development early in their pre-service program. Taking a systems perspective might help them to develop a more multifaceted conceptualization of their role as an ECE as well as a more inclusive view of the varied knowledge parents and ECEs bring to their partnerships. The best ways to help students gain this perspective need to be investigated. In any case, students’ desire to work effectively with children provides an excellent source of motivation for acquiring more complex, bio-ecological, systems based view of human development. That deeper understanding of how to best support children’s learning and development might, in turn, motivate them to build the confidence and skills they need to collaborate effectively with families and truly make a difference in children’s lives.
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Appendix A

List of the 19 Family Involvement Activities for Which Students Rated Importance, Feasibility and Their Own Level of Preparedness

1. Schedule meetings with families
2. Ask parents to describe child
3. Ask parents for input on child’s program
4. Call home
5. Meet with parents to set goals
6. Engage parents in daily conversation
7. Send notes to individual parents
8. Invite parents to sit on committees and do fundraising
9. Invite parents to spend time in your room
10. Schedule child, parent and teacher meetings
11. Provide parenting info
12. Provide classroom newsletters
13. Provide a home-centre journal
14. Participate in family get-togethers outside of work time
15. Ask parents for input into curriculum
16. Conduct home visits
17. Communicate with parents electronically (e.g. e-mail, website)
18. Invite families to participate in centre governance (e.g. board of directors)
19. Introduce your program/centre to parents