



The influence of prior experiences on early childhood education students' anticipated work with families



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Early childhood educators are increasingly expected to collaborate with families.
- Prior experience and beliefs influence perceptions of work with families.
- 215 beginning and 217 graduating ECE diploma program students were surveyed.
- Biographical experience and education were both related to perceptions.
- Findings highlight the need for further research related to ECE preparation.

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are increasingly expected to work collaboratively. In order to best prepare pre-service ECEs for their work with families, faculty members need to understand the prior experience and beliefs students bring to their professional training. This cross sectional study examined the biographical experience and previous postsecondary education of 215 beginning and 217 soon to graduate ECE diploma students. We found that prior experience and education were related to students' ratings of parental knowledge and to their assessments of the importance and feasibility and their level of preparation to engage in family involvement activities.

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1. 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, Russell, & Clyne, 2007; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisson, & Waniganayake, 2009; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; McCuaig, Bertrand, & Shanker, 2012; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; valentine, Katz, & Griffiths, 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 (Author & Author, 2005; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Seefeldt, Denton, Galper, & Younoszai, 1999). 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 (Epstein, 1995; Marcon, 1999). Most importantly 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 (Epstein, 1995). 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

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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 (Ausubel, 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). For instance, pre-service teachers believe about inclusion (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2003), diversity (Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011), the integration of technology in the curriculum (Cullen & Greene, 2011), as well as beliefs about knowledge, mathematics and science (Cady & Rearden, 2007) all influence their learning and practice. These are just a few of the areas of pre-service teacher belief that have been investigated. 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; Tatto, 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).

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 (Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerkhof, 2009; Graue, 2005). Conceptualizations based only in personal biography are limited and it is important that pre-service teacher training broaden students’ ideas about family from those based only on personal experience 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. Similarly, the powerful influence of personal biography on pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards parents was identified in a study conducted in the Netherlands (Denessen et al., 2009). 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 (Denessen et al., 2009; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003).

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 (Powell, 1998; Swick & Graves, 1993; Swick & Williams, 2006; Zellman & Perlman, 2006). 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 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.

2. The current study

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. One aim of this study was to try to replicate the findings of Graue and Brown (2003) with a sample of pre-service ECEs as opposed to pre-service teachers. In Ontario, the current minimum educational requirements for teachers and registered ECEs differ. Teachers require an undergraduate degree and a bachelor’s degree in education (approximately 6 years of post-secondary education). In contrast, registered ECEs require a minimum of a college diploma in early childhood education (approximately 2 years of post-secondary education).

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

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