

## **Opinion of the Graduates Teaching in Pre-Schools about Effectiveness of MA Early Childhood Education Program**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on a larger study conducted to examine the Effectiveness of the MA ECE program at the Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab. Various aspects of the teacher education program were examined regarding their effectiveness as a preparation for teaching. Three sessions of focus group discussions were conducted with program graduates who had embarked on teaching careers. Twelve graduates of the program were identified for participation in the focus groups by snowball sampling. It was the experience of the focus group participants that the program was focused more on theory and provided fewer opportunities for putting this into practice. Pre-school education is mostly provided by the private sector. Consequently, job opportunities for ECE teachers are mainly in the private sector. At the time of the study, IER did not collaborate with the private sector to prepare teachers according to private sector demands. It was suggested that a four year, concurrent program for professional training would better equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitude they require to teach at ECE level rather than a two year, consecutive program, as the current MA is. The concurrent program would prepare effective teachers by providing them practice opportunities for their theoretical knowledge and by developing a strong relationship with ECE settings, including private sector ones. Further research to assess the knowledge and skills requirements of prospective ECE teachers is required.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education; Student experience; Concurrent or consecutive provision.

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## **Introduction**

Childhood education is now considered to be an important part of child development. Early childhood teaching is not a simple task but a complex endeavour. Ambiguity about what teachers should actually accomplish in work with very young children presents challenges in the preparation and support of early childhood teachers' professional learning. This is further complicated by the consensus that early childhood teacher education (ECTE) is unique and requires special preparation (Marxen, Ofstedal, & Danbom, 2008) in order to be useful (Isikogku, 2008).

Teacher education colleges and universities are required to make sure that the knowledge and skills offered to prospective teachers are relevant to the needs of young children. Darling-Hammond, Griffin and Wise (1992) found out that teacher preparation programs need to have more intensive and extensive exposure to knowledge of learning and teaching alongside an in-depth understanding of the social view of education. ECTE programs also require to provide opportunities to apply the knowledge and skills in real ECE classrooms under guided and supervised practice.

In ECE, the teacher's role is to provide a solid foundation to the children to face the challenges they will encounter in the coming years. The teacher is considered a vital force in making a learning day successful for a child. The attitude of a teacher can often be reflected in the learning process through positive traits such as empathy, love and understanding. Warmth and nurturing qualities are essential characteristics of a teacher to develop a healthy relationship with children in the ECE classroom. A teacher with a constant drive for self-development and learning attitude supports the teachers to play their role effectively (Eliason & Jenkin, 1990). The teacher needs to acquire the adequate knowledge, attitude and skills (Birman et al., 2000, Hawley & Valli, 1999) for a profession which has become more technical and complex and which needs to draw on sociology, philosophy, psychology, and communication theory. Thus, the teacher requires well planned, resourceful, pre-service education (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Copple and Bredekamp (2009) described the qualities of early childhood (ECE) teachers: the ECE teachers' need to know that their developmentally appropriate practices are grounded in their search of child development and learning. They should also possess the skills to provide learning opportunities according to the needs of children because they have knowledge of child learning and development, and they must use the most appropriate approaches for each child. Therefore, these teachers are required to be thoughtful and reflective, and use their knowledge to take their decisions for the best interest of children and in order to create a classroom environment which facilitates children to do their best. These teachers interact with parents, families and communities for the betterment of children.

The knowledge gained through teacher training should therefore equip them with the ability to decide how the curriculum can be used to engage children to achieve important outcomes. This knowledge further assists teachers to adjust teaching strategies according to the needs and characteristics of the individual child or group of children. Jenkins and Eliason (2008) are clear that only well-trained teachers can meet the needs of optimal development, growth and care of children. They must have the ability to plan quality pre-school experiences and then evaluate how effectively these experiences were delivered. Elkind (1987) has described young children facing many challenges due to changing society and technology; which has pressurized children to grow up fast. They are required to learn quickly to cope with these pressures and he has argued that children may look outwardly mature but they are not, either intellectually and emotionally. ECE teachers should therefore have the ability to take pressure off children and provide opportunities for creativity, imagination and plenty of time to play.

These teachers need to educate the public about the support that high-quality ECE can provide to parents. Korthagen (2013) has stated that ECE teachers are required continuously grow, expand and develop new ideas while connecting their work, and the work of others, in the areas related to their profession.

In an ECETE program, prospective teachers can get a deeper appreciation of ECE theories, along with appropriate developmental practices and put the theories into practice in the ECE classroom. Practical skills and strategies facilitate planning of interesting and engaging learning environments for young children that encourage exploration and active learning. These techniques need to include knowledge of designing developmentally appropriate learning centers for the ECE children. Teachers should gain the skills to assess children's progress and to use authentic assessment instruments to understand results which will enable them to monitor children's progress in various development domains. Other important skills for prospective teachers are knowledge of resources and curriculum material to use in the classroom for effective learning. They should possess the knowledge of curriculum development and its appropriate use in different settings for different groups of children (Jacobs, 2000; Jacobs, 2001), not only for present needs but also for a rapidly changing future (Mowbray, Holter, Teague, & Bybee, 2003).

In Pakistan, from 2001 the University of the Punjab has provided pre-service teacher training for early childhood education through a Master Level program. This was the first teacher education institution to provide an MA in ECE in Pakistan.

### **The survey population, research questions and method**

Graduates of the program who had completed the MA ECE program and then had opportunity to apply those skills in their pre-school teaching were considered as the best source of information (Morrison, 1993) regarding the program. These graduates are in the best place to assess how well the program prepared them for their role to work as pre-school teachers. They have the experience of the process of the program and have also had the opportunity to practice the acquired skills.

Accordingly, the study on which this paper draws was conducted to find out the opinion of graduates working in pre-schools about the effectiveness of the MA Early Childhood Education in the Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab. The Qualitative Method was used to find out the opinion of teachers, using focus a group discussion method. Boateng (2012) notes that a focus group is a kind of group interview and data is generated as a result of communication between participants. Group interviews are normally used as a convenient and quick way to collect data simultaneously from number of people. Instead of asking individual questions, the questions are posed to the group and the participants are encouraged to discuss, pose their own questions, exchange ideas and comment and share their experiences. According to Joan (2006), a small number of people can provide relevant information regarding the research topic in an exploratory study using the focus group method consisting of open-ended questions.

The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think the way they do. In a focus group, participants respond to the probing questions asked by the moderator/researcher and their responses are used to determine opinions regarding the topic/s under discussion. The responses also help to find out the degree of agreement that exists within the group.

Thus, various aspects of the program were discussed including the knowledge and skills required for ECE teachers, the MA ECE program experience and their experience in the classroom after graduating.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were:

1. To find out the opinion of the graduates teaching in an ECE setting about the knowledge acquired in the MA ECE Program
2. To find out the opinion of the graduates teaching in an ECE setting about the skills acquired in the MA ECE Program

### **Research Questions**

These objectives gave rise to a series of Research Questions:

1. What is the opinion of the graduates teaching in pre-schools about the foundational knowledge acquired in the MA ECE Program?
2. What is the opinion of the graduates teaching in pre-schools about the professional knowledge acquired in the MA ECE Program?
3. What is the opinion of the graduates teaching in pre-schools about the pedagogical knowledge acquired in the MA ECE Program?

The questions were posed to the group and an opportunity was provided to respond as per their choice.

## **The Program**

At the core of the ECTE MA was the intention to equip future ECE teachers with essential knowledge and skills. The curriculum was broken down into four major areas based on Literature (Oancea, 2014; Foulger, Wetzel, Buss, & Lindsey, 2012; Eaton, Dressler, Gereluk, Becker, 2015). The core areas of concern were

1. Foundational knowledge related to the aspects of history of education, philosophy of education, sociology of education and human development and educational psychology.
2. Professional knowledge in supporting student interests and learning, use of technology both for learning and pleasure the development of innate and learned skills, knowledge of assessment of children and how these assessments can be used for the development of children.
3. Pedagogical knowledge: At the ECE level, the great diversity found calls for a very flexible program of action to be used in the teacher's enabling of the students to benefit the most. In simple words it would be a group of techniques and strategies that have to be made operative. As already said, a flexible but tangible pedagogy is required at ECE level. Such pedagogy may work at this level, as well as at the higher levels of learning like brainstorming, critical thinking and idea generating.
4. The practice of classroom teaching is usually supervised by a teacher educator/cooperative school teachers and normally supported, though not always. This practice can be observations in school and student teaching in classrooms.

To explore the in-depth details of the ECE essentials and prerequisites, a focus group was formed comprising 9 graduates of the ECE program. The questions were put to the graduates who were asked to respond and discuss on the basis of their exposure and experience.

As already explained, the teachers in the focus group were graduates of the program working in public and private sector settings in different capacities and with varying lengths of experience. According to Krueger, & Casey, (2014) the focus group is a form of group interviews that facilitate the communication between research participants for generation of data. Group interviews are normally used as a convenient and quick way to collect data from several people simultaneously. In focus groups, people interact with each other and they are encouraged to talk to each other, so they can express their point of views, exchange their views, ask and respond each other's questions instead of researchers asking all the questions. The method is predominantly useful for exploring people's experiences and knowledge and it can be used for examining views of people, about what people think how they think and also why they think that way.

To recruit to the focus group, the “snowball technique” was applied. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which subjects find future subjects from amongst their acquaintances. Thus the sample group is said to grow like a rolling snowball (Voicu & Babonea, 2011). Initially it was difficult to find the graduates who were working as ECE teachers as the university did not have a record of alumni employment. To overcome this, class representatives of the last two years were approached by telephone. The telephone number was supplied by the Department of Elementary Education, Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, to contact them for consent and collecting information for the study. These class representatives were informed about the nature of the study and they were requested to contact relevant graduates and ask them to participate in the study. These graduates were further requested to contact their class fellows who were working as ECE teachers. In this way we found graduates who were willing to take part in the study and ready to share their experiences regarding the program. As the sample was built up and the focus group held, it was realized that enough data had been collected to enable the research questions to be answered.

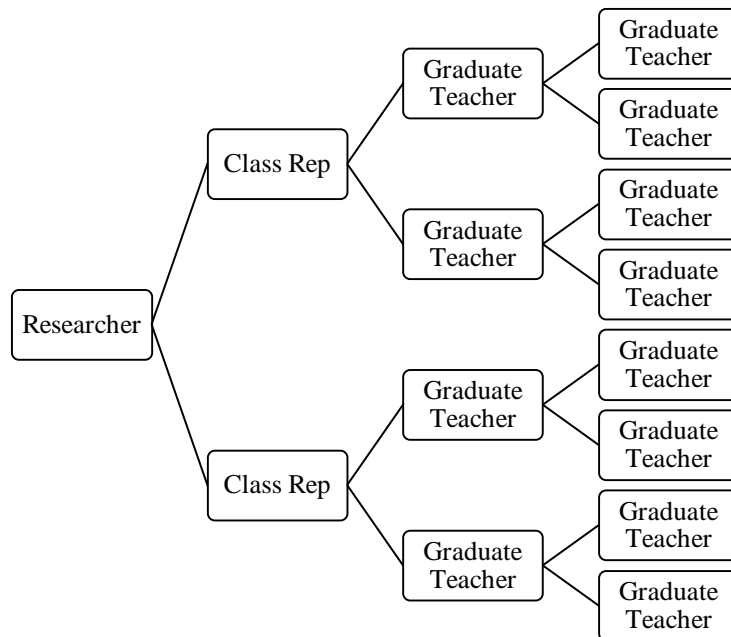


Figure 1. Snowball sampling

### **Outcomes from the Focus Group**

The focus group discussion was grounded in participants' experiences of the program. The focus was about their experiences regarding foundational knowledge, professional knowledge and methods and content knowledge, as well as their experiences of practice teaching. It was also about their experiences of various parts of the program and their effectiveness in teaching. They discussed which parts of the program were useful and to what extent and formulated suggestions to improve the program. The focus group was held at the Department of Elementary Education, University of Education and Research, University of the Punjab Lahore.

As the focus group discussed various parts of the program, their responses were recorded and the transcribed. According to Moustakas (1994) for a group, a systematic procedure is applied. First, the researcher introduces the purpose of the study and then asks the participants to discuss their own experiences regarding the program. Significant statements are identified and clustered into themes. Then the researcher synthesizes these themes and ascribes them to individuals' experiences. Participants also provided their opinion on the criteria developed for foundational knowledge, professional knowledge and methods knowledge. The following questions were asked:

1. Did you have opportunities to practice theory taught in the program?
2. What foundational knowledge did you get during the program and how was it helpful in your teaching?
3. What skills did you attain during the program in foundational courses and how was it helpful in your teaching?
4. What professional knowledge did you get during the program and how was it helpful in your teaching?
5. What professional skills did you get during the program and how was it helpful in your teaching?
  - i. How has the management course helped you in managing classes?
  - ii. How has the assessment course helped you in assessment of children?
  - iii. How the curriculum course assisted you regarding curriculum of children?
  - iv. How the learning theories course facilitated your teaching?
6. What pedagogical knowledge did you get during the program and how was it helpful in your teaching?
7. What pedagogical skills did you get during the program and how was it helpful in your teaching?
  - i. Did the courses help you establish learning corners?
  - ii. Did the program help you to design learning activities for ECE children?

- iii. Do you think this program helped you to develop communication with parents?
  - iv. Did this program enable you to write progress reports for parents?
  - v. Did you get opportunities to practice the acquired skills in real classrooms during pedagogical courses?
8. Please share your experiences regarding your teaching practice during the program.
  9. Did this degree help you find employment?
  10. What would you want to change in the program?

### **Outcome 1: Theory and Practice**

Everyone agreed that the current program focuses more on theory and they have fewer opportunities for practicing theory. Moreover, graduates from the group commented that they felt they were not well equipped to work in the current system. One of the participant said “I felt that I did not acquire the sufficient skills to work as a pre-school teacher after graduation, therefore, I took admission in a Montessori Diploma course to develop my skills before starting teaching.” Three more participants said that they also attended a Montessori Diploma course to develop their practical skills prior to teaching.

### **Outcome 2: Foundational Knowledge**

The participants felt that they had difficulty in relating theory to practice. One participant stated, “I am not sure why we had philosophy of education; I cannot relate that to my ECE teaching.” Others were of a similar opinion, but after discussion in the group about various schools of philosophy they realized that this had practical value. “I wish that would have been discussed during the course and I could have related the philosophy to our work”. Many participants were of the view that child development content was good; it provided them the knowledge about what to expect from the children of this age. Most of the participant complained that during the course they did not have the opportunities to apply that knowledge in practical situations and that if they had been able to apply that knowledge then they would be better prepared to deal with the children. One participant commented, “I think more opportunities should be provided to apply these theories in real situations so that prospective teachers can value what they are learning”.

### **Outcome 3: Professional Knowledge**

An area which drew attention of several participants was classroom management. One participant stated, “I think I did not have skills to manage the ECE class as I did not get a chance to manage a class during the course.” Another participant added “We learned a number of management theories but they were not related to the ECE classroom.” A participant added “ECE classrooms are different; the needs are different than those



needed for older children. But we did not understand how we could apply these theories in ECE classrooms.” One participant suggested “ECE classrooms in the University may be organized like real ECE classrooms in management area class so the prospective teachers can have feelings of real situation, this is the area I struggle most as a novice teacher.” The participants also talked about motivating students for learning. One participant said “Managing and motivating individual, young children needs specific skills and we did not get these skills during this course. We just learnt the theories of motivations without practical application.”

Participants said assessment is quite an important area; it provided them theoretical knowledge about assessment. Most of the participants were of the view that young children are not the same as other students and the assessment area was focused on general assessment techniques rather than specific assessment techniques for ECE children. The participants found that ECE children assessment focused more on observations and portfolio development and they did not practice these skills during the course. The participant further discussed that they did not have the chance to write children reports for parents and schools, so when they started teaching they found it difficult. One participant concurred “When I was asked to write children reports for parents for the first time, I was confused about how to write it.” Another participant endorsed the comment by saying, “It is actual experience in a classroom that determines success.” They all agreed that if they had been provided opportunities to practice their learned skills in real classrooms, it would help them in professional teaching.

#### **Outcome 4: Pedagogical Knowledge**

When the group discussed the pedagogical and content courses, they said that they did not get much opportunities to practice the skills. One participant said, “Hands on experiences are the best. We practiced teaching during the course in front of a class of peers. Teaching a lesson in front of peers is nothing like teaching in front of children.” Another participant agreed, “I would recommend more time teaching in a real classroom rather than in our own class. Observing real classroom teaching before our own teaching would also give us a chance to understand the method course better and prepare us for professional teaching.” In preschool classrooms, there are learning corners for the development of various areas. The participants said they did not have the chance to develop a corner during the program. One participant added, “We need to create corners in our classroom to get the feel of a real preschool class. It can also give us confidence and experience to work in a real classroom.”

**Outcome 5: Practice teaching**

Practice teaching was also an area of concern among program graduates. Most of the participants agreed that practice teaching was the relatively more exciting part of the program and they were looking forward to it, but they did not get to practice teaching in ECE classes. One participant replied, “It was good but it could better if we were provided the opportunity to teach in ECE classes.” Another participant endorsed the comment, “I had to teach class seven and six, so I could not practice in an ECE class.” One participant added that, “our practice teaching was in public schools while ECE is mostly provided by the private sector, which I felt was just a waste of our time.” A participant suggested “the department needs to provide opportunities to prospective teachers for their practice teaching in private ECE schools. This will enhance their skills and also may foster opportunities to get an offer of a job from the placement school”. The other further endorsed this point “Even if they do not get job, working in the ECE setting will definitely increase their chances of employment in similar schools.”

The graduates of the program discussed the lower status of ECE teachers in schools. One of the graduates who had to work in administration also stated that, after doing MA in ECE, many graduates would prefer to teach higher classes rather than ECE. Other graduates agreed that this is a problem as they are teaching the pre-school children, they do not enjoy the same status as other teachers. This was also stated by Winton, & Snyder, (2015). Therefore, IER needs to raise awareness regarding the importance of ECE, and work to raise the status of ECE teachers.

Every one of the twelve members of the focus group agreed that pre-school education is mostly provided by the private sector. Hence, job opportunities for ECE teachers mainly lie with the private sector. At present, IER does not collaborate with the private sector to prepare teachers according to its demands.

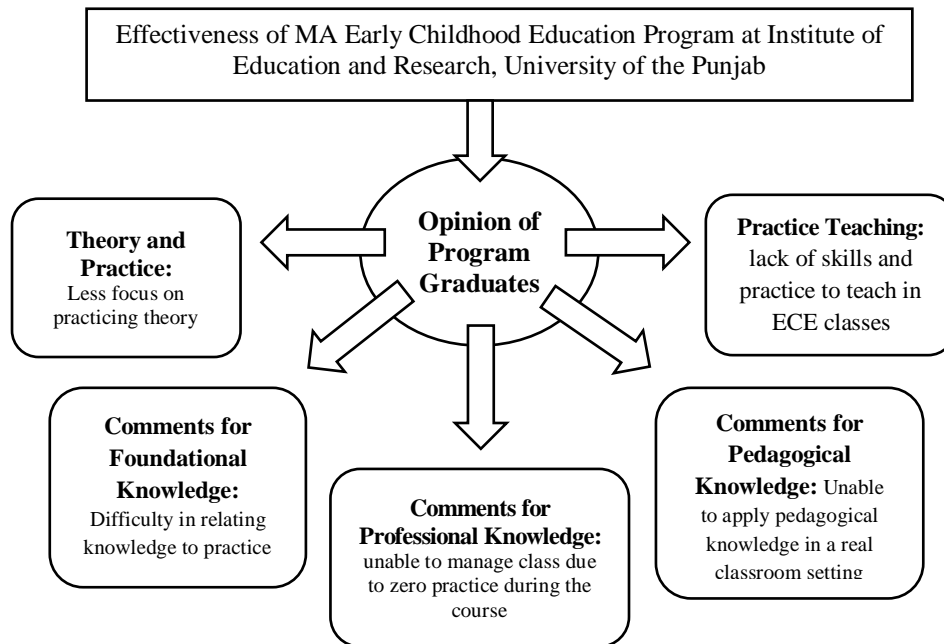


Figure 2. *Issues discussed by Program graduates*

The group participants also shared their views about communication skills. They said, although during the program “We have ample opportunities for presentations, which provides us with the confidence to speak in public, but our communication skills require more practice. Our English language skills are not strong while in the private sector communication in English is considered necessary”. They recommend that the department needs to offer special courses for enhancement of these skills. They said that they did not have the chance to develop their skills to communicate with parents and colleagues. A course for development of required communication and language skills needs to be considered to facilitate prospective teachers to get employment in the private sector.

## Discussion

The graduates of the program stated that program focuses more on theory and provides fewer opportunities for practicing theory; therefore, they had difficulty in relating theory to practice. Similar results were found in previous studies (Whitney, Golez, Nagel, Nieto, & Nieto, 2002; Dillon, 2004; McVey’s, 2004; Hoffman, Wetzel, & Maloch et al., 2015). Program graduates were not well equipped to work in the current system. Some of the graduates attained admission in a Montessori Diploma course to develop skills before starting teaching. This shows that there are inadequacies in the program which leads the graduates to spend more time in doing a diploma course after completing a master degree to learn the skills that they feel they are lacking.

In Pakistan, at present, pre-school education is mostly provided by the private sector. Hence, job opportunities for ECE teachers are mainly in the private sector. IER does not collaborate with the private sector to prepare teachers according to their demands. Similar results were found previously by McVey (2004) in a study where teachers considered that practice teaching and field experience is more helpful in their practical life in private and public schools.

### **Conclusion**

The program graduates teaching in ECE are of the opinion that their program of study certainly assisted them in securing teaching employment by virtue of their holding a Master's Degree. They valued the opportunities provided in the program to build confidence in communicating in class. They reported that they had been encouraged to share their view in the safe environment of the classroom. They also spoke about the areas of concern that require improvements. They found it difficult to relate theory to practice and said that they were not provided opportunities to practice acquired skills. Three of the participants said that they completed a one year Montessori Diploma after the MA ECE because they felt they require further skills to work with ECE children. They suggested more practice activities in the professional course to acquire relevant skills, in relation to the unique needs of ECE, indicating ten hours' practice in ECE classrooms in each pedagogical course to practice specific subject teaching skills in real classroom settings as has been the practice in many other countries for some years now. Further research is required, however, into both teaching methods used in ECETE and its relationship to skill development.

### **Recommendations**

- With collaborative work, private institutions would feel more comfortable with the IER graduates and this would open the doors of employment for graduates of the program. This would also provide opportunities for program graduates to be in a better and more comfortable position to negotiate with ECE institutions for better facilities for themselves. Therefore, a strong link between IER teacher educators and private ECE organisations is highly recommended and should be developed.
- The evidence from the focus group is obviously limited data on which to ground valid conclusions. However, the fact that the outcomes from it align with those from other studies indicates that it is worth considering these outcomes as a possible agenda for reform and enhancement of the program area.
- A four-year concurrent program for professional training would better equip prospective teachers with knowledge, skills and attitude they require to teach at ECE level.

- Practice teaching needs to be planned for more than six weeks and also needs to place prospective teachers in appropriate pre-schools rather than elementary schools.
- In this study it was difficult to assess the knowledge and skills acquired by the prospective teachers due to limited time; a further study can be conducted to assess these skills.

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