



## The theory–practice challenge: International early childhood education students making connections in Australia

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 16, Issue 1 & 2, 31–47, 2019*

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### ABSTRACT

*Increasing numbers of international students are enrolling in Australian universities in early childhood teaching degrees. For many of these students understanding the early childhood education pedagogies and approaches is a different way of viewing teaching and learning from their own cultural perspective. Many of these students struggle to understand the teaching and learning theory that underpins early childhood education in Australia which draws on play-based pedagogies, child centred learning, and intentional teaching. This small-scale case study sought to gain insights into how international students undertaking a Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) in an Australian university were enabled to link their theoretical learning to practical applications of being an early childhood teacher. Using questionnaire data, the study found that the international students struggled to connect the theory and pedagogical thinking that underpins early childhood education. What was most significant for these students was the experiences they gained through their practical placements.*

### INTRODUCTION

This article situates itself in Australia, where much has been written about internationalising the curriculum and international students in higher education (Barton, Hartwig, Joseph, & Podorova, 2016; Blackmore et al., 2014; Knight, 2004; Leask, 2001; Postiglione & Altbach, 2013). Globally, Australia has the third highest number of international students after the United States and the United Kingdom (Australian Government, 2015b), with Chinese and Indian students being the largest population of international students seeking to study in Australian Universities (Australian Government, 2015b). International students choose Australian institutes for a variety of reasons that include academic rigour, reputation of the qualification, and status of the university (Australian Government, 2015a). Promoting international student recruitment forms an important aspect of internationalisation for tertiary institutions. The notion of internationalisation is not a new phenomenon according to Knight (2013). She defines internationalisation as a process of integrating intercultural and

international approaches to the curriculum (Knight, 1999; 2004). At the institutional level, she suggests four overarching dimensions: activity, process, competency and ethos (Knight, 1999). Activity includes international students (as is the case in this article), or study abroad programmes; process includes dimensions in the area of research, service and teaching; competency includes the anticipated outcomes of student competencies; and ethos is one that produces “a culture or climate on campus [that] promotes and supports international/intercultural understanding” (Barton et al., 2016, p.16; Knight, 1999). In this article we draw only on the two dimensions of activity and competency, as these most closely relate to the study.

For the purposes of this study we draw on the definition of an international student which identifies them as being an individual who is not an Australian citizen or an Australian permanent resident, New Zealand citizen, or holder of an Australian permanent resident humanitarian visa (Australian Government, 2019). Recent research has shown that “for many international students, studying abroad is considered a pathway to permanent residency” (Blackmore et al., 2014, p. 7). As early childhood education is listed as one of the key areas on the skills shortage list in Australia (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2019), many students select this option, which has led to increased numbers of international students coming to Australia (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2018). The authors contend if international students are well prepared and supported for work in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts, as graduates they will be well placed to provide children with quality teaching and learning experiences.

When studying in Australia, international students face varied challenges, including adopting a new language as well adjusting to life and study in a new place (Dai, Matthews, & Reyes, 2019; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Yu & Wright, 2016). They are not always proficient in English; many of them struggle with the language and find it challenging adjusting to life (Gomes, 2015; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Differences like that of culture and language create challenges as students have to adjust to unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning which they may not have experienced in their home country (Andrade, 2006; Lê & Fan, 2015). Often the ways of learning and teaching in Western universities do not align with the diverse cultural backgrounds and the learning needs of students arriving from overseas (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, Van Gyn, & Preece, 2007).

This article forms part of a wider study, Work Placement for International Student Programs (WISP). This project took place across six universities during 2014-2016 (see WISP, 2016). One of the aims of the wider project was to identify and understand challenges, concerns and successes for international students, their mentors and coordinators when undertaking studies in Australia. In response to concerns raised by mentor teachers in the workplace, a pilot programme was run at Deakin University in 2015 for students to undertake before going on placement, and the outcomes of that pilot have been reported in a previous publication (Joseph & Rouse, 2017). This article is a follow-up discussion on the lived experiences of the same cohort in 2016 after they had concluded their final requisite placement for the course. It discusses factors that had impacted their capacity in making connections between their learning throughout the course and their concerns regarding their perceived capabilities and competencies in taking up a role as a graduate early childhood teacher. This

article adds to the body of research in teacher education on how best to prepare today's international students for working in Australian early childhood education and care contexts.

## **SITUATING THE STUDY: THE MASTER OF TEACHING (EARLY CHILDHOOD) AT DEAKIN UNIVERSITY**

Australian higher education institutes are governed by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) which has been developed to “ensure that qualification outcomes remain relevant and nationally consistent, continue to support flexible qualifications linkages and pathways and enable national and international portability and comparability of qualifications” (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 9). The MTeach (EC) has been designed to comply with the expected standard for an Australian Master level degree which states that graduates “will have specialised knowledge and skills for research, and/or professional practice and/or further learning” and will be able to “apply this knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner” (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 13).

The MTeach EC course is a two-year course (programme) at Deakin University that aims to prepare graduates to teach aged from birth to five years. Students enter the course with a pre-existing undergraduate degree from any area of study. The course consists of sixteen units (subjects), twelve core units and four elective units. All the MTeach (EC) students must complete seventy days of supervised professional field work placement (practicum) (Deakin University, 2017).

In undertaking the MTeach (EC) course, students are provided with both subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Shulman, 1998). They need to “know their stuff”, the “nuts and bolts” of the curriculum as well as know ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ to teach (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; McArdle, 2010, p. 69). This article reports on the perceptions from the 2015-2016 cohort of international students on how the MTeach (EC) had supported and enabled them to make connections between their learning throughout the course and their perceived capabilities and confidence in taking up their role as a graduate early childhood teacher.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY IN AUSTRALIA**

The national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) provides a foundation for ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Drawing from constructivist and social constructivist epistemologies, the EYLF positions play as the “context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 6). Early childhood teachers draw on play-based pedagogies that encourage children to learn and explore, solve problems, create and construct. These are seen as important intentional teaching strategies that teachers use to facilitate the children's

learning and development. The image of the child within this framework is one “who possesses his or her own directions and the desire for knowledge and for life. A competent child! ... who is a possessor and constructor of rights, who demands to be respected and valued for his/her identity, uniqueness and difference” (Rinaldi, 2013, p. 16).

Intentional teaching is highlighted as a key pedagogical approach. As outlined in the EYLF, intentional teaching “involves educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and action” where educators are to “move flexibly in and out of different roles and draw on different strategies as the context changes” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). Intentional teaching in this context occurs through “planful, thoughtful, and purposeful actions where the teacher recognises an opportunity for a child to learn academically or developmentally” (Epstein, 2007, p.1 as cited in Kilderry, 2015). Intentional teaching is more than teaching and imparting skills and knowledge to children. In fact, it is the “opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have ‘always’ been done that way” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). Intentional teaching strategies encompass teacher decision making, intentional planning and creating supportive learning environments (Kilderry, 2015). Studies have shown that many preservice teachers face difficulties in engaging with this thinking when entering the teaching profession. Paquette and Rieg (2016) suggest that pre-service teachers have found that programmes tend to focus on theory with few opportunities for practical experiences which links theory to with practice. In this way pre-service teachers feel unprepared for the challenges they may face as graduates to teach in diverse classrooms.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ASIAN CONTEXTS**

Like Australia, early childhood education in many Asian countries has experienced significant curriculum reform since the turn of the century, recognising the importance of promoting child-centred, child-initiated play-based teaching and learning (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005; Vong, 2012). Countries such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have developed curriculum policies and frameworks which position children as autonomous and active learners, emphasising active engagement in play (Guo, Kuramochi, & Wang, 2017; Nyland & Ng, 2016; Pui-Wah, 2011). A number of Western curriculum models such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Reggio Emilia, Montessori and the Project Approach, which all have a strong emphasis on promoting child-centred, child-initiated play-based teaching and learning have been incorporated into the thinking around teaching and learning in early childhood education across these contemporary curriculum frameworks (Li et al., 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005; Vong, 2012). There is a shift in the way children are viewed, from seeing them as innocent and in need of protection (Smith, 2015), to one where children are active and autonomous learners who have agency in the process of their own learning (Guo et al., 2017).

This new positioning has led to a pedagogical shift for teachers in these countries—moving from transmissive models of teaching to experiential learning pedagogies, where the focus is on lifelong skills and character building—encouraging children to explore their own ideas through active engagement in

the learning process (Nyland & Ng, 2016). Despite curriculum policies advocating a child centred approach, studies reveal that the more traditional ‘teacher directed curriculum’ of the past continue to prevail (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Li et al., 2011; Pui-Wah, 2011), one where children are seen as learning “when they are engaged in drill, practice and rote” (Wong, 2008, p. 115). Teachers in these Asian countries have difficulties implementing a play-based curriculum and often resort to developing teacher-led play-oriented pedagogies (Hua, 1998, cited in Vong, 2012). The prevailing teaching style in many Asian continues to reveal a transmission model of teaching and learning, with play being used as a mechanism for transmitting knowledge (Fung & Chen, 2012), and where practices are rigid and uncreative (Pui-Wah, 2011). Yang and Yang (2013, cited in Joseph & Rouse 2016, p.138) “found within a Chinese context, teachers took the lead when planning and organising the play experiences for the children, assuming more control and ownership of ‘play’ than the children”. This finding was also evident in the Mulia (2016) study of dramatic play in an Indonesian preschool. Nyland and Ng (2015), in their comparative study of curriculum reform in Australia (six states and two territories) and Singapore, found that teachers in early childhood settings in Singapore were concerned that play was not a suitable substitute regarding the academic rigour found in more transmissive pedagogies. They felt the notion of play raised concerns for parents, they expected children went to school to learn and not to play.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Ethical approval was granted to undertake the study with the MTeach (EC) international students from Deakin University. These students were all from Asian countries: China (11), Taiwan (1), Hong Kong (1), Singapore (2), and Malaysia (1). The students, all female, were aged in their mid to late twenties. None of the students in the study had prior early childhood education experience when commencing the course. In May 2016, after the students had completed their final field work placement (practicum) an anonymous research questionnaire was handed to the students to complete at the end of their final on-campus class. Eleven responded. This final placement consisted of a 25-day experience working with children aged four to five years in a preschool setting.

This case study allows for confirmatory (deductive) as well as explanatory (inductive) findings (Yin, 2009). A questionnaire method was employed as it allowed for the students to respond anonymously to open and closed questions without fear of coercion or of responses impacting on their final results. The open-ended questions focused on the student experience both during their placement and their on-campus classes. Some open-ended questions included: How prepared do you feel you were to undertake this final placement? What aspects of the placement were influential in supporting and building your confidence and capabilities as an Early Childhood teacher? What were the key aspects of the placement that you found most challenging? The open-ended questions provided opportunities for “honest personal comment[s]” (Cohen Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 255). In this way, the participants provided an insight into their views using “their own language” (Rowley, 2014, p. 312).

When analysing and coding the questionnaire data, the authors employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as an analytical tool to explore the lived experience and perceptions of the participants (Joseph, 2014; Smith, 2017;

Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Both authors undertook the analysis, all data from student participants is reported using direct quotations and coded as S1 through S11 (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011) Three themes emerged and are reported in the findings. The first related to the stress for the international students associated with undertaking the course. The second theme focused on the nexus between theory and practice and the third theme related to the value of the placements in preparing for teaching. Generalisations to teacher education courses in Australia cannot be made as no statistical data were analysed in this small-scale study.

## **FINDINGS**

From the questionnaire responses, students largely felt that the placements were supportive in building their understanding of the role of an early childhood teacher in Australia. They were, however, still struggling to connect this understanding with the theoretical aspects of early childhood education with which they had engaged during the on-campus classes and in their academic readings. When they had completed their final placement many still believed that they were not confident or adequately prepared to take on the role of an early childhood teacher. The course is designed to meet the AQF standards at a Masters level. The content of the course is very academic, and students felt the “university expectations are quite high” (S4).

### ***Who is a student at risk?***

The students reported the demands of undertaking the course as being quite stressful, particularly during placement. They had to meet the placement requirements and undertake assessment tasks for other units at the same time. S6 suggested that “ideally, assignments should be due before or after placements so that our workloads and stress can be reduced”. This was a common thread emerging through many of the responses. S1 believed that

It would be better that we could focus only on the placement. Since there is too much going on in other units that we are too busy to focus on one thing (S1).

She went on to state:

This program is really tough for international students. Since this program is packed, we must pass all the units from the first trimester [un]til the fourth one... If we failed any unit, we might not be able to graduate on time and money need[s] to be paid for arranging another student visa (S1).

S5 suggested that it is important to:

warn the international students that the program is quite demanding and stressful. EC education is way [more] complicated than you had imagined before enrolment (S5).

This is similarly supported by S11 who felt that “the requirements can be more realistic in a way that it is more in line with the level and experiences of the student doing the course”.

### ***Theory and practice nexus***

The students’ responses reflected a dissonance between the theory they engaged with on-campus and with the practical application that they had experienced during placement. Their responses identified a need for more integration between the theoretical understanding of play theories, teaching strategies and pedagogies when planning for learning and interacting with children, and the practical application. Students commented on this gap in the following ways:

- Sometimes it is hard making connections between learning at university and the practical side. Completing the ATA [the placement assessment] was quite difficult as I feel that it is still something I’m grasping (S4)
- More practical teaching and lectures are definitely a must for us other than theoretical learning (S6).
- There is a disconnection between what we learn at university and the realistic placement. Realistic world [placement] = basic knowledge; university expectations = theoretical (S7).
- Linking theory to practice has always been an issue for most people (S8)

S4 specifically suggested that she needed “more exploration of documentation and how everyone does this differently; engaging in more exploration of teaching strategies and possibly practicing”.

While the majority (7 of 8) of the questions allowed for open-ended reflective comments, one question sought out insights into the challenges students faced as graduating teachers. This question was designed to elicit information regarding the way they had engaged with, and connected to, the theoretical understanding of early childhood education. Students were asked to comment on a list of challenges, typically identified by the authors from past student feedback. They were asked to then tick as many of the challenges that they felt had impacted them. Table 1 below indicates the number of responses against each challenge. The responses show that most of these students were still struggling to connect their learning with early childhood practice. All students had ticked more than one option, with some identifying as many as six from the ten listed. Interestingly, of highest concern was a lack of understanding around child development, expectations of learning, and identifying relevant teaching strategies.

**Table 1:** Responses from students highlighting key aspects of the placement they found most challenging

Key Challenge	Number of responses
Having realistic expectations and understanding of the children's development, skills and capabilities	9
Identifying teaching strategies to facilitate the learning	8
Linking theory from University Classes to what you saw or were doing on the placement	5
Documenting children's learning	4
Understanding the learning that was happening in the play	3
Understanding how to identify children's strengths and interests	3
Teaching through play-based learning	3
Planning using emergent curriculum	2
Teaching following child-initiated play	2
Planning the teaching	1

***Value of the placements in preparing for teaching***

The students overwhelmingly believed it was the experience gained on placement that really provided them with deeper understanding of what is expected of an early childhood teacher in Australia. Students responded that they felt undertaking the placements assisted them to connect with the work of an early childhood teacher. This is evident in the following comments:

- These placements helped us to get an idea of how does it look like (sic) to work with young children (S1)
- Placements provided me the opportunity to have practical experience in the field which were really important to me (S6).
- I was (feeling) panicked before doing full control as I wasn't 100% sure what to do until the day before. However, when I started [to] run the program, the encouragement and support I got from teachers gave me confidence and their suggestions allowed me to improve my practice (S9).
- To be involved in [the] day-to-day business of teaching and learning at the pre-school, through this experience I learned the practical tricks, tips, discipline, teaching, materials, storybooks, educational toys resources (S10).



Whilst students felt that they learnt about teaching from their placement, there was also a belief that in some instances the expectations of the mentor did not fit with the expectations of the University. The following comments illustrate this.

- I felt a bit confused regarding writing lesson plans. I've been told the whole past trimesters to write lesson plans and take them seriously whereas in this placement my mentor ignores doing such things (S8).
- The mentor teacher expected me to be helping their daily tasks mainly [being] her assistant, however the expectations of the university put me in a position that I had to do much more than that, which had given some kind of pressure to the educators in the room (S11).

Students were also asked in the questionnaire to identify ways they felt the course could be improved to be more supportive of international students. While not all students commented, there were some clear ideas presented in response. These centred on ways to build the theory-practice nexus.

- Maybe add some practical aspects in it, how to deal with special situations (S2)
- Maybe providing a workshop introducing how Australian ECEC settings are like before the first placement for international students (S5).
- Maybe dedicate one module to discuss & outline the 'basic' & 'practical' resources necessary to day-to day teaching, learning for example- how to do a running record, story book titles, nursery rhymes & tunes. I realise these things are actually covered in the course, but maybe not being 'emphasised' enough so we lost it come placement time (S10).

## **DISCUSSION**

In examining the findings through Knight's (1999) lenses of activity and competency, it is clear that the activity of engaging in the placement was instrumental in building student competence. It was apparent that the international students were struggling to connect with theoretical understandings that underpin early childhood education in Australia. These students started their studies in the MTeach (EC) with no experience of an Australian context in ECEC, or understanding of the role of teachers in these settings, nor had they been inside an Australian ECEC setting before undertaking any placements. Their perception of teaching and teachers had been largely influenced by their own schooling in their respective countries. While the placements were critical in supporting them to gain an understanding of the Australian ECEC context, their lived experiences of teaching and teachers coming into the course did not fully prepare them for this new role. Despite the curriculum approaches now being adopted in many of their home countries, teachers in those countries themselves struggle to connect the policy with practice (Guo et al., 2017; Nyland & Ng, 2016; Pui-Wah, 2011). This cultural disconnection may also have contributed to the stresses and anxieties the students experienced whilst undertaking their study in Australia.

Students reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the workload expectations of the overall course. The MTeach (EC) course structure requires

students to focus on developing skills and competence whilst on placement, as well as planning for teaching. Concurrently, they also are expected to undertake weekly activities and tasks, unit readings, and complete assessments for other units in which they are simultaneously enrolled. This structure leads to a continuous pressure for students to meet all their course requirements while at the same time focusing on developing an understanding of their role as teachers in an environment with which they had little familiarity and connection.

The students' prior cultural experiences, which positions academic results highly, sitting alongside their lack of contextual understanding of early childhood education approaches, impacted on their stress levels. These students were trying to make connections between what they noticed and experienced during the placements with what they were learning in the course. While they focused on completing assessment tasks for other units, they found it difficult to allocate sufficient time to engage with the theoretical thinking that would assist them to make sense of what they were experiencing on placement. This concentrated focus on their assessment tasks also impacted on their capacity to develop their planning and documentation of learning, which is required as part of the placement expectations.

The international students acknowledged that even though they had completed all of the core units that were necessary to meet overall requirements of the course, they still lacked confidence and understanding for working effectively as an early childhood teacher. Overwhelmingly, they believed they did not have enough knowledge of key elements of early childhood education, particularly as this related to an awareness of play and having realistic expectations of children. They also identified that they did not have sufficient understanding of the teaching strategies that support effective learning in an early childhood setting. The international students found that following children's interests to inform their curriculum confusing, as they were often unsure of the content they felt they were meant to be teaching. This was evident when they identified a confusion between what they perceived planning to be (writing a lesson plan) with the emerging planning undertaken by their mentor. The students felt that they did not have realistic expectations and understanding of the children's development, skills and capabilities which created a situation where they struggled to identify appropriate strategies to support children's learning and development. These international students come to the role of early childhood teaching from a cultural perspective which focuses on content knowledge and transmissive pedagogies (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Li et al., 2011; Pui-Wah, 2011). They had difficulties in noticing the intentional teaching strategies that were involved in decision making around interactions with children, emergent planning and creating supportive learning environments. While this was a key component of the content covered in their course work, the students felt challenged to see the connection between what they observed, the theory of teaching and learning in an early childhood context, and strategies that surround this. Instead, the students looked for the more didactic approaches and transmissive pedagogies with which they were familiar (Nyland & Ng, 2016).

The notion of Knight's (1999) dimensions of activity and competency resonate here. Although the placements were designed to build the competence of the student to enact the expectations of an early childhood teacher in Australia, the activity of being an international student who draws from their own cultural experience, was in many ways disconnected from the activity of learning in an

Australian context. This created a tension in the international students' capacity to connect theory with practice. This disconnection between activity and competence was also evident in the way they recognised (or failed to recognise) the teaching strategies enacted during their placement.

Despite feeling they did not have sufficient skills, knowledge and strategies for teaching in an early childhood setting, they identified that the practical experience of the placement still supported their emerging understanding of the role of an early childhood teacher. At times, however, the students felt that the expectations and practice of the mentors did not connect with their own perspectives of what was expected of them during the placement. One student in particular, commented she was expected to be the mentor's 'assistant'. Without knowing what was being asked of her, it is hard to know if she was being exploited by her mentor, or she did not understand the role of the teacher in supporting children's learning during the routines enacted each day. In an Australian early childhood context, the role of the teacher is to support children's learning and development through a pedagogy of care (Rockel, 2009). Routines such as preparing the room for meal times or sleep times is an important aspect of a teacher's role, and all adults working with the children assist in these processes. For some of the international students, their notion of the 'teacher' is the one who 'teaches'. This is a different perspective to seeing the teacher as one who supports learning through these routines, at times creating a tension for the students.

The students felt they required more practical opportunities to develop the skills of writing observations and compiling documentation of children's learning in relation to assessment. The EYLF focuses on children's learning as it relates to five learning outcomes (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Development, 2009), rather than on learnt content knowledge. As such, early childhood teachers draw on assessment approaches such as learning stories (Carr, 2001), rather than relying on more formal assessment tools such as testing or rubrics used in formal school classrooms. Again, whilst this was a key component of their course work, the students found it challenging when required to develop this documentation during their placements.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article acknowledges that some international students come to study in Australia in order to gain a qualification that may lead to permanent residency status, and take up employment in the field of study. Preparing international students to gain employment in an Australian context plays an important part in their learning. It is evident from the data that the international students in the 2016 MTeach (EC) cohort experienced a number of challenges when undertaking their teacher education course. They identified feeling stressed and being overwhelmed by the workload surrounding their study. These stresses related to both understanding the connection between the professional context of teaching and learning in early childhood education settings, as well as meeting expectations and demands of the course. The international students in this study were undertaking their learning in a language that was not their first. As discussed in the literature, it could also be inferred that they encountered additional difficulties adjusting to life and study in a new and diverse social and cultural context (Andrade, 2006; Gomes, 2015; Lê & Fan, 2015; Poyrazli & Grahame,

2007). Students from many Asian countries, studying early childhood education, also have to adjust to unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning which they may not have experienced in their home country. This was compounded by them having to meet placement requirements alongside needing to complete assessments tasks and course work which was additional to the placement requirements. Students identified the need to continue passing all units across the course as the stress of failing added additional financial and visa implications.

For these students there was a misalignment between Knight's (1999) dimensions of competency and activity. The on-campus classes and study materials across the course introduced students to teaching and learning theory, policy and guiding practice frameworks. The international students strongly felt the need for more connections between theory and practice. They did, however, highlight the value of the practical experiences during placements as supportive for developing their understanding and capabilities as teachers in an Australian early childhood context. Nevertheless, they also felt a need for greater inclusion of practical activities to further develop the necessary skills required to undertake observations, prepare documentation, and write programme plans. The balancing of practice and theory which enables graduates to have the necessary specialised knowledge and skills is a challenge for course developers. It is important that consideration be given to creating opportunities that allow for sufficient 'on-campus workshop time' that will better prepare students to understand the theory-practice nexus.

This study is limited as it only focused on international students, eliminating the voice of domestic students who may also be experiencing similar challenges and stresses. The student cohort which was the focus of this study had no local students enrolled at the final placement unit, however, and as such, the study was unable to seek the views of local and domestic early childhood education students. Research has identified that theory-based courses with fewer opportunities for practical experiences leaves students ill-prepared for the challenges they face as graduates who will teach in diverse classrooms (Paquette & Rieg, 2016), so it may be assumed that the issues identified in this study are common for both local and international students. Additionally, the authors recognise the small sample used in this study poses a further limitation. The findings are not able to be generalised across a wider international early childhood education tertiary student population. Further research undertaking a comparative investigation of domestic and international students, may yield additional insights to this area of study. Another opportunity exists for undertaking similar research across tertiary institutions both within Australia and internationally.

Supporting international students to be successful early childhood teachers in Australia is significant for ensuring that all children experience quality teaching and learning and "that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation". (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.4).

Manuscript Submitted: February 22, 2019

Revised Manuscript Received: June 26, 2019

Revised Manuscript Accepted: August 14, 2019

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