
BRINGING PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE TO THE RURAL UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM THROUGH COMMUNITY PLAY SESSIONS: EXPERIENCES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AND FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study examined the experiences of 24 teacher education students and nine caregivers who participated in a weekly community play session on a rural University campus in NSW, Australia. Students completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the 13 week semester and at the end of the semester and were asked about confidence levels in various aspects of infant/toddler teaching skills and about the value and challenges of the play sessions. Parents completed a questionnaire about the benefits of play sessions for themselves and their children. Quantitative results indicated that students rated play session interactions with parents as being least helpful in preparation for practicum and least valuable in general, but indicated they gained most in the area of interactions with parents. Students increased their confidence levels in most areas of teaching skills by the end of the semester, except in parent-interaction. The major challenge cited was the high number of university students compared to children. Qualitative themes that emerged included issues related to environments and student learning and practice. Parents indicated high ratings of benefits for themselves and their children, particularly in the area of supporting social development of children and providing social networking for themselves. Implications for creating practical experiences related to parent interactions and relationship building in teacher education programmes, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Professional experiences are recognised as the most valuable component of pre-service teacher education programmes (Page & Hastings, 2006; Scully, 2004). Courses in teacher education programmes should ideally prepare students for the reality of educational contexts. However, it is professional experience that allows the most opportunities for authentic learning experiences and the environment to take 'educative' risks in terms of developing teaching practices in schools, early childhood settings and communities alongside experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). For many students, professional experiences provide the opportunities to make important connections between the theoretical learning they do as part of on-campus university-based classes and how this learning plays out in the schools, early childhood services and community settings. The way in which universities deliver professional experience varies across universities in Australia, so it stands to reason then, that how students are prepared for their experiences will also vary. The main aims of this study are to examine rural student experiences in their participation in a community-based practical learning experience, involving

university-community based play sessions, particularly in the area of communication with parents, as well as family experiences and benefits for themselves and their children.

PRACTICAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

An important aim of teacher education courses is to prepare teachers that can show confidence in 'real world' teaching situations in order to be deemed fit for the 'real world' (Botsman, 2002). The ability to demonstrate confidence in working with young children; demonstrate an understanding of child development; engage and motivate children's learning; engage with communities in productive, respectful ways; and supporting parents in their important parenting role are some of the required skills to be an early childhood teacher (DoCS, 2002). These skills cannot be adequately assessed through essay writing or other assessment methods often used in university assessment practices (Munday, 2005).

There has been a trend toward providing students with more meaningful and 'authentic' learning and assessment experiences that reflect the contexts that pre-service teachers are likely to encounter as teachers following graduation (Rademacher *et al.*, 1998; Sileo *et al.*, 1998; Cuttance & Stokes 2001; Munday, 2005; Southcott, 2006). Through authentic experiences students' gain deep understanding of educational contexts and children's development, which are "essential learning" (Southcott, 2006). The professional experience subjects that students in this study will complete over the course of their teacher education degree also allow them to participate in an authentic practice-based learning experience. However due to the nature of professional experience subjects and the distance required to be travelled by students attending the inland rural university, these experiences are short and intensive in nature. Whilst these experiences are valuable to the development of the pre-service teacher, students often feel unprepared for the context in which they find themselves (Jobling & Moni, 2004).

PARENT-EDUCATOR RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing relationships with families is an essential aspect of being an early childhood professional (Christian, 2006) and good teachers see this as an important part of their role of an educator (Bennett, 2006). Children's learning and development is situated in the cultural and social contexts of their particular community and family unit (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). Because the family is the most powerful influence on the development of a child, collaborative partnerships between staff and families can bring benefits to all involved, particularly to infants and toddlers (Caplan *et al.*, 1997; Gonzalez-Mena & Widemeyer-Eyer, 2004; NSW DoCS, 2002). The importance of partnerships between early childhood educators and families is recognised in its inclusion as an essential component of government mandated quality assurance systems (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Briggs & Potter, 1999; NCAC, 2005).

Despite being recognised as important, working with families is an area where early childhood educators receive little preparation (Nieto, 2004). Pre-service teachers may get plenty of professional preparation in child development, planning,

health and safety, however they are not typically provided with learning opportunities for building parent-teacher relationships (Christian, 2006). In one study, early childhood teachers reported that they were not adequately prepared in their work with families and needed more information on and practice with understanding family dynamics and interacting with families (Bennet, Katz, & Beneke, 2006).

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PLAY GROUPS

It is widely recognised that establishing genuine university links with the community is beneficial to both universities and members of the community. (Bartlett, 1995; Reardon, 1999). One way that university-community relationships can be created is through the use of playgroups, which not only provide opportunities for student professional learning, but positive outcomes for families (Barbour & Bersani, 1991; Jackson, 2006; Lewis, 2007). Playgroups can also be a way of minimising social isolation of families (Berry, 1983). This may be of particular relevance to families in rural communities who may not feel they have many social connections.

To summarise, the present study aims to examine how experience in weekly scaffolded play sessions can assist pre-service teachers in their preparation to work with families, and how this experience may benefit families. The use of playgroups to build university-community connections is becoming more common. Some research exists as to the constraints and practicalities of establishing early childhood playgroups on a university campus (Lewis, 2007), however, little is known about how university play groups can work to enhance pre-service teachers' skills and understanding of parent-teacher relationships and how they may benefit children's development.

METHOD

Participants

Students

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher education course in a regional University in New South Wales, Australia. Twenty-four out of the larger group of 26 teacher education students consented to participate in the study. Three of the participants were third-year primary teacher education students enrolled in a subject focused on early childhood environments for play and learning, and the remaining students were first-year early childhood students enrolled in the above mentioned subject as well as another subject focused on infant and toddler development, education and care. Student data was collected by a research assistant, rather than subject lecturers, and names were removed from all data and replaced by participant numbers so that identities could be protected. Participation in this study was voluntary and not required as part of the subjects for which students were enrolled.

Student participants were predominantly female, (n=21, 87.5%), compared to male (n=3, 12.5%). The age range of participants was between 18 and 53, with a mean of 24.29 years (SD=8.35). For data analysis purposes, participants were

grouped into “older” (25 years and older) and “younger” (under 25 years) cohorts. Seven participants were in the “older” group (29.2%), and 17 were in the “younger” group (70.8%). Most of the student participants were single (n=15, 65.2%), and some were married (n=6, 26.1%) or in de facto relationships (n=2, 8.7%). The language that participants identified as speaking in their homes included English (n=13, 56.5%), Aboriginal English (n=9, 39.1%), and other (n=1, 4.3%). Ten participants had children of their own (29.2%), and 17 had no children (70.8%).

Parents

Parents were recruited through flyers distributed at two primary schools in a regional NSW city, as well as through flyers posted on a student forum at the university where the study took place. Parents phoned or emailed one of the primary investigators if interested in participating. A total of 17 parents attended play sessions and 14 consented to participate in the study. Three parents originally attending play sessions discontinued their involvement in the study. However, due to inconsistent attendance and participant attrition, only nine parents returned surveys. Some parents did not answer the demographic questions. All parents were female and the age range was from 27 to 38, with a mean of 30.63 years. The ethnic background of parents was as follows: 66.7% were Caucasian (n=4), 16.7% were Asian (n=1), and 16.7% were other (n=1). Most of the parents were married (n=7, 87.5%), and one was separated. All parents indicated the main language spoken at home was English. Fifty percent of parents were employed (n=4), 25% were unemployed and looking for work (n=2), 12.5% were unemployed and not looking for work (n=1), and 12.5% were enrolled in school as a part-time student (n=1). The educational background of the parents were as follows: 55.6% had a postgraduate qualification (n=5), 22.2% had a TAFE or equivalent qualification (n=2), and 22.2% completed HSC or equivalent (n=2).

None of the nine parents identified their children as having special needs. A total of 27 children were enrolled in the play session, ranging in age from 5 months to 5 years. Due to parent attrition and inconsistency of attendance, on any given week, there were generally around 12-18 children in attendance. Parents were welcome to attend play sessions even if they did not consent to participate in the study.

PROCEDURE

Students

Student participants were enrolled in one or two undergraduate subjects in a teacher education course that were linked to weekly play sessions. One subject focused on infant/toddler development, education and care and the other focused on environments for play and learning. The three primary students were enrolled only in the environments subject, whereas the remaining early childhood students were enrolled in both subjects. Students attended a weekly one-hour lecture and one-hour tutorial for each of these subjects. Additionally, students attended one-hour per week of play session as a tutorial requirement for each of these subjects. While attendance at the play session was a requirement of students, completion of measures collected was not. Students completed a four-week practicum placement in an early childhood setting mid way through the semester, with a one week study break following. Thus, students attended three play sessions, had five weeks away from play sessions, then attended play sessions for another seven consecutive weeks. During the fourth week of class, student participants completed a pre-practicum questionnaire and during the second to last week of class, completed a post-practicum questionnaire.

Weekly play sessions

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

For the first two weeks, lecturers and a research assistant set up the environment and modelled interactions with parents for the students. This was done with the intention of easing students into their role during the play sessions. Beginning in the third week, students worked in groups of 3-5 as part of an assessment item in the infant/toddler development subject to design the environment and plan resources for a designated age group. Thus, students were responsible for organising and running the play sessions, with a feedback session with the subject lecturer following the play session each week. Students who were not involved in the planning for that particular week were encouraged to observe children and parents and interact with them as well. For the final three weeks of play session, students enrolled in the environments for play and learning subject were required to implement a variety of projects with the children. Lecturers were responsible for overseeing the play sessions, interacted with students, parents, and children, and gave feedback to students.

Parents

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

MEASURES

Pre-Practicum Student Questionnaire

This questionnaire was distributed to student participants at the end of class lecture time and was collected by a research assistant, who then removed names and assigned participant numbers. This questionnaire contained both open-ended and close-ended questions and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants were asked about demographics (e.g., age, gender, relationship status, number of children, and language spoken at home). Open ended questions included "Please provide details of previous work experience with children", and "What do you expect to gain from these play sessions". Students were also asked if they believed the play sessions were going to assist in their preparation for their four-week practicum and asked them for an open-ended comment. The questionnaire also contained nine Likert-scale questions. On a scale ranging from 1 (very unconfident) to 5 (very confident), students were asked to rate their confidence level in their interactions with babies, interactions with toddlers, greetings of parents/carers, interactions with parents/carers regarding children's development, using observational techniques, interpreting observations, planning environments for babies, planning environments for toddlers, and ability to interact with fellow students.

Post-Practicum Student Questionnaire

This questionnaire was distributed to students during play session, and again during the end-of-class lecture time for students who did not complete the measure during play session time. This questionnaire took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, depending on the detail of the responses given. This questionnaire also contained a variety of open-ended and close-ended questions. Open-ended questions included "What did you gain from the play sessions?", "What was the most challenging aspect of play session for you?", "What was the least challenging aspect of play session for you?", "What was the most valuable aspect of play session?", "What was the least valuable aspect of play session?", and "Any other comments?".

Students were also asked to rate the same nine questions regarding their confidence on a 5-point Likert scale as contained in the pre-practicum questionnaire. Students were additionally asked to rate the helpfulness of the play sessions in terms of preparation for their practicum on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unhelpful) to 5 (very helpful), and space was provided for comment. Students also rated various aspects of the play sessions on the same 5-point scale in terms of preparation for practicum, including "setting up environments", "interactions with children", "interactions with parents", "team work with other students", "scaffolding by lecturers", and "taking on responsibility and ownership of play sessions", with space for open-ended comment. Students also rated how helpful they thought the play sessions were in terms of making links between information presented in lectures and readings, application of this to a real life setting, and they were asked to comment as well.

Another question asked students to rate how well the play sessions met their educational expectations (e.g., did students feel they gained what they expected to gain) on a scale of 1 (didn't meet any expectations) to 5 (met all expectations). Students were also asked to rate on a scale of 1 (very unchallenging) to 5 (very challenging) how challenging various aspect of play session were including "groupwork with other students", "ratio of children to students", "interaction with parents", "inappropriate expectations of parents", "planning appropriate environments", "wide age range of children", and "uncertainty of role". Students were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 (unvaluable) to 5 (valuable) how valuable various aspects of play sessions were including "interaction with parents", "taking ownership of play sessions", "working with wide age range of children", "planning environments for a real life situation", "lecturer scaffolding", and "working with other students". Students were given the opportunity to name any "other" aspects they found valuable. Students were also asked if they were early childhood or primary students.

Post-Play Session Parent Questionnaire

Parent questionnaires were distributed and collected during the second to last play session, or were mailed out to parents who were not in attendance on that day. This questionnaire, which contained both open ended and close-ended questions took approximately 15 minutes to complete. This questionnaire contained demographic questions such as age, gender, relationship status, number and age of children, language spoken at home, employment status, education level, ethnicity, religion, and income level. Parents were also asked if their child had any special needs and if they would be interested in attending play sessions again next year. Open-ended questions included "What did you think about the students' role in the play sessions?", "What did you expect to gain from these play sessions before they began?", "Now that the play sessions are ending, what do you think you gained from them?", "What would you like to stay the same?", and "What would you like to be changed?".

Parents were also asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 1 (unsatisfied) to 5 (satisfied) regarding various aspects of their life including "day to day life", "relationship with child(ren)", "role as a parent", "social support network", and

“relationship with partner/spouse”. Parents were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 (unbeneficial) to 5 (beneficial) how beneficial the various aspects of play session were to them personally, including “networking or socialising with other parents”, “interacting with uni students”, “interacting with lecturers”, “activity ideas”, “time to play with their children”, “gaining knowledge about child development”, and “getting out of the house”. Room was left for parents to comment on what they thought was most and least beneficial to them. Parents were also asked to rate on the same scale how beneficial they thought various aspects of play session were to their child, including “interaction with other children”, “interaction with Uni students”, “new activities and toys”, “spending quality time with the parent”, “new experiences away from parents”. Room was again left for parents to comment on what they found to be most and least beneficial to their child.

RESULTS

Students

Students were asked to rate their level of confidence in a variety of areas on a 5 point Likert scale, both at the beginning and end of the semester. Table 1 presents these results. Although the total (N) was too small to run comparative statistics, the mean confidence ratings were higher on all aspects at the end of the semester, except for on the two items related to parent communication, in which case the ratings were almost the same.

ANOVA was used to compare students who were mature age (25 years or older) with those who were younger (under 25) to see if there were differences in their confidence levels at the beginning and end of the semester. Interestingly, older students at the beginning of the semester were more confident than younger students in their interactions with babies ($F=5.94$, $p=.02$), in their interactions with toddlers ($F=5.3$, $p=.03$) and in interpreting observations ($F=4.49$, $p=.04$). However, by the end of the semester, the only significant difference was in interactions with babies ($F=4.6$, $p=.04$), where mature age students were still more confident than younger students.

Table 1.
Students Confidence Ratings Beginning and End of Semester

	BEGINNING OF SEMESTER	END OF SEMESTER
	<i>Mean</i> SD <i>Range</i>	<i>Mean</i> SD <i>Range</i>
Interactions with babies	3.08 1.10 1-5	3.79 1.10 1-5
Interactions with toddlers	3.71 .86 2-5	3.92 .65 3-5
Greeting parents/carers	3.5 .98 2-5	3.29 .75 2-5
Interactions with parents/carers regarding children's development	3.08 .97 1-5	3.00 .722 2-4
Using observational techniques	3.00 1.02 1-5	3.50 .78 2-5
Interpreting observations	2.58 .93 1-4	3.21 .83 2-5
Planning environments for babies	3.00 1.06 1-5	3.65 1.03 1-5
Planning environments for toddlers	3.42 .58 2-4	3.83 .70 3-5
Ability to interact with fellow students in the class	4.09 .67 3-5	4.17 .70 3-5

Students were asked how helpful various aspects of the play sessions were to them on a scale of 1-5. Table 2 summarises those results. The highest rated aspects were taking ownership and responsibility, teamwork with other students, and scaffolding by lecturers. The lowest rated aspects were interactions with parents and preparation for practicum.

Table 2.
Student end of semester ratings of helpfulness of various aspects of play sessions.

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
How helpful was play session in preparation for professional experience	3	5	3.96	.806
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac - setting up environments	3	5	4.00	.798
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac- Interactions with children	3	5	4.08	.776
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac - interactions with parents	3	5	3.96	.751
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac- Teamwork with other students	3	5	4.21	.721
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac - scaffolding by lecturers	3	5	4.21	.658
Aspects of play session in relation to preparation for prac- taking responsibility and ownership of play sessions	3	5	4.22	.736
Making links between information presented in lectures, subject material and readings and the application of these to a real life setting	3	5	4.09	.733

When asked what they felt they gained from play sessions some students wrote more than one response and these were counted separately. There were a total of 51 responses including communication with parents (17.65%), interactions with children (15.69%), better understanding of infants and toddlers (13.73%), planning skills (13.73%), more experience (9.8%), confidence (9.8%), ideas and preparation for practicum (9.8%), collaboration with peers (5.88%), decision making (1.96%), and timely feedback (1.96%).

Students were asked how challenging various aspects of play sessions were for them. Table 3 summarises those results. The most challenging aspect for students was the ratio of children to adults (eg. too many adults in the room). Group work with other students had the second highest rating.

Table 3.
Student ratings of how challenging various aspects of play session were for them.

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Group work with other students	2	5	3.63	.824
Ratio of children to students	1	5	3.71	1.122
Interaction with parents	2	5	3.29	.859
Inappropriate expectations of parents	1	4	3.00	.590
Planning appropriate environments	2	5	3.58	.717
Wide age range	2	5	3.50	.780
Uncertainty of role	3	5	3.61	.583

Students were asked how valuable various aspects of play session were for them. Table 4 summarises these results. All means are over 4, indicating that in general, all aspects were valuable. However, the opportunity of working with a wide age range of children was rated highest and interaction with parents was rated lowest.

Table 4.
Student ratings of how valuable various aspects of play sessions were for them.

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Interaction with parents	3	5	4.00	.780
Taking ownership of the play sessions	3	5	4.33	.637
Opportunity to work with a wide range of children	3	5	4.38	.770
Planning environments for real life situations	3	5	4.21	.658
Lecturer scaffolding	3	5	4.04	.751
Working with other students	3	5	4.25	.608

Two main themes emerged from the analysis of the students written comments in response to gains, challenges, helpfulness and value of the play sessions. The first theme relates to environments and the second theme relates to issues about student learning and practice.

Environments

The play session environment proved useful to the students in many ways. Students reported that the play sessions allowed them to:

Try different things in a safe and relaxed environment.

Play sessions were viewed positively and encouraged students to consider play based environments:

[playsessions] provided a positive experience as to what to expect from a child based play environment.

Others indicated that the environment afforded them more timely feedback from lecturers, peers or from the children themselves:

Trying things in a controlled environment that offers feedback immediately.

As the semester progressed, students were required to take more responsibility for the physical set up of the environment and the experiences or activities provided for children and parents to participate in. Most students enjoyed taking a gradual leadership role as highlighted by students who indicated that what they valued was:

Being able to plan the environment on one week with the provisions we wanted to have.

Preparing [the room] and then seeing the need for adjustment later.

The play session environment was also seen by students as assisting the interactions with children and parents as one student indicates about the value of the play session environment:

Getting to know children and parents in a relaxed setting.

Very helpful to provide opportunities for trying things that are different in a controlled environment.

In terms of the environment, most students commented negatively on the high number of students to children. It was challenging for some students to have such a high student to child ratio:

The ratio of children to adults. Having more adults in the room than children.

Mixing with the children as there were not enough children and adults seemed to overcrowd the children when we all get involved.

This 'overcrowding' or high student to child ratio was cited as a possible reason why students found interacting with children difficult

Ratio of students to children sometimes made it hard to interact with children.

Students that had previous early childhood experience compared previous environments with the current play session environment. The play session environment was not always seen as more positive than other early childhood environments:

Play sessions seem more forced and crowded than real life settings.

In addition to the physical and social aspects of environment, play sessions also contributed to student learning and practice.

Student Learning and Practice

This theme relates to what the students perceived they learnt from participating in the play sessions and how they used the sessions to practice teaching skills. Students reported that play sessions led to a better understanding of how infants and toddlers develop and how best to provide for their development. Statements such as those below illustrate how students came to connect participation in play sessions with a growth in understanding:

I was able to gain an understanding of different activities for specific ages and the benefits it had on children's development and play.

Play sessions were helpful as I could see how activities can be planned based on children's abilities. [Play sessions] made me understand how to implement emergent curriculum.

It was good to see what the lecturers are talking about as it makes understanding the theory easier.

Students also used play sessions as a place to practice skills such as observing, planning, and interacting with children, peers and parents:

We were able to practise interactions with children during the play sessions.

Practice in interactions with parents and children was very useful and I found that I slowly developed confidence in this area.

How to interact more with children and plan sessions around them.

Some students brought their previous experience in early childhood settings to bear on their learning. In terms of their own learning, those that had worked or were currently employed in early childhood services and those that had their own children viewed play sessions differently when it came to learning. Older students were of the opinion that the play sessions were of more benefit to the younger students:

I can see that the play sessions are helpful for the younger students straight out of school who may not have had a lot of opportunities to interact with children in this kind of setting but as a mother who has had all kinds of experiences in a range of settings I did not gain a lot.

Learning in play sessions was not an individual or isolated act brought about by individual student and child interactions alone. Students reported how they also learnt by watching and/or interacting with their peers and lecturers:

It was helpful to watch lecturers and other students respond to children and the parents and how they use different strategies for classroom management and interaction with students, children and parents.

The connection of student and lecturer relations gave continuity to my learning.

Students also began to make connections between what they were learning in other university based classes and what they were seeing and experiencing in the

play sessions. Students were really beginning to see the link between the more cognitive theoretical aspects of their courses and the more practical components:

I thought it was good to have afternoon class to reflect on the play session as we were able to discuss issues about the setting and link the situation to a real life setting.

Great to see all the theory in action and puts everything into perspective and makes it [theory] a lot clearer.

In addition to the positive aspects of the play sessions, such as, being able to practice teaching skills, taking leadership responsibilities a growing understanding of early childhood, a positive outcome of participating in the play sessions for students was a growth in confidence.

I gained more confidence playing with the children and greeting parents.

Confidence in planning and implementing experiences for children. We were able to see which activities interested children and test some of our own ideas.

Parents

Table 5 reports the descriptive statistics regarding parents' scaled responses (5-point Likert scale) on how beneficial they considered various aspects of the play sessions to them personally. Means of 4 or above on all of the items indicate a high level of perceived benefit for each aspect. Gaining activity ideas was rated as the most beneficial ($x=4.67$), followed by networking or socialising with other parents ($x=4.56$) and getting out of the house ($x=4.56$) and having time to play with child(ren) ($x=4.56$). Gaining knowledge about child development was rated lowest ($x=4.0$).

Table 5.
Benefits to parents of various aspects of play session

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Networking or socialising with parents	4	5	4.56	.527
Interacting with Uni students	3	5	4.33	.707
Interacting with lecturers	4	5	4.22	.441
Activity ideas	4	5	4.67	.500
Time to play with your child(ren)	3	5	4.56	.726
Gaining knowledge about child development	3	5	4.00	.866
Getting out of the house	4	5	4.56	.527

Table 6 reports descriptive statistics regarding parents' scaled responses (5-point Likert scale) on how beneficial they considered various aspects of the play sessions to their children. Means of all aspects were well over 4, indicating a high level of perceived benefits for children of all aspects. The highest ratings were for interactions with university students ($x=4.89$), new activities and toys ($x=4.89$) and new experiences away from parents ($x=4.89$). The lowest rated aspect was spending time with parent ($x=4.44$).

Table 6.
Benefits to children of various aspects of play session

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Interaction with other children	4	5	4.78	.441
Interaction with Uni students	4	5	4.89	.333
New activities and toys	4	5	4.89	.333
Spending quality time with his/her parent	3	5	4.44	.726
New experiences away from parent(s)	4	5	4.89	.333

Parental responses to the qualitative questions were categorised. When asked “What did you think about the students’ role in the play session?” all parents said something positive such as “great and friendly” and “very helpful and enjoyable”. Two participants commented on how some students took an active role and others sat back and did not interact much.

When asked “What did you expect to gain from the play sessions before they began?” some parents/carers stated more than one expectation and these were counted separately. There were a total of 12 responses, which included socialisation for child (33.3%), being able to provide practice for the Uni students (25%), new activities for child (25%), and opportunity to meet other parents (16.7%).

When asked what they thought they actually gained from the play sessions, some parents/carers stated more than one gain and these were counted separately. There were a total of 12 responses, which included child gaining confidence and social skills (50%), fun time for the child (16.7%), meeting other mums (16.7%), new activity ideas (8.3%), and gaining insight to the child (8.3%).

When asked what they would like to see stay the same some parents/carers gave more than one response and these were counted separately. There were a total of 11 responses, which included variety of activities and toys (63.6%), interaction from Uni students (18.2%), amount of time in play session (9.1%) and venue (9.1%). When asked what they would like to see changed, responses included no changes necessary (33.33%), new activities (33.33%), implement a group time (11.1%), more variety of food for morning tea (11.1%), and acoustics of the venue (11.1%).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine pre-service teachers’ perceptions and experiences through participation in on-campus community play sessions in a rural setting as well as the experiences of families and children. Findings indicate that overall confidence levels for students generally increased but students found factors such as student to child ratios challenging. Generally students rated their confidence on all aspects higher after the semester, except on the two items related to parent communication. This is paradoxical as we would expect this to improve the most. Why did the confidence levels on these items stay the same? One possible explanation for this finding is that parents may have been more focused on socialising with other parents, rather than interacting with the pre-service teachers.

Thus, motivation for attending play sessions may have been different for parents and students.

When asked what they gained from play sessions, communication with parents was named most frequently. It appears that although students indicated that they gained a lot from interactions with parents, they clearly need more development in this area. Students also suggested that scaffolding from lecturers was useful, therefore in order to increase student confidence in the area of parent interactions, lecturer scaffolding as a teaching strategy could be used more strategically and explicitly.

Experienced students (either parents themselves, have worked in EC settings or currently employed in EC settings) reported that they did not gain or learn anything from the play sessions. They did not consider a role as 'teacher' or 'more experienced other' in terms of scaffolding their peers – gains that were considered were from the result of student-child interactions rather than a more holistic view which also considers peer teaching and learning. Pre-service teacher education courses particularly those that prepare students for professional experience may need to do more around peer teaching and learning

The aspect of communication with parents was where students gained the most during the play sessions yet they still found interaction with parents uncomfortable and difficult and were least confident in this area. In a professional experience situation where contact is short and intensive and contact with parents may be limited due to the nature of working parents' lives, students do not have the time or sustained contact with parents to enable them to build trusting, productive and reciprocal relationships. Research tells us that it is these very relationships that have the most positive outcomes for children and families (Caplan, Hall, Lubin & Fleming, 1997; Gonzalez-Mena & Widemeyer-Eyer, 2004; NCAC, 2005; NSW DoCS, 2002). The earlier teacher educators can expose students to the importance of relationships and scaffold them in what is the most difficult area the more successful and confident students are likely to be firstly in the professional experience context and ultimately in their role as early childhood teachers.

Parents generally gave high rating of benefits to self (highest was socialising/networking with other parents) and benefits to children (highest was interactions with uni students, new activities, and new experiences away from parent). This indicates that parents saw play sessions as a time to spend socialising with other parents and for their children to gain new experiences away from the parent. This supports previous findings that social isolation can be reduced in some family communities (1983). These play sessions may have been particularly beneficial for these rural families in providing them with an opportunity for networking. With regard to how they saw the students' role, they all had positive things to say, but some noticed the discrepancy between those who took an active role and those who did not, e.g., "Most of the students are very enthusiastic with the children", "Some of the students were fantastic-interacting with both children and parents whilst others seemed to sit back".

Parents indicated in what they expected to gain that they realised the importance of the experience for university students, and for their child and themselves to socialise and get exposure to new activities, e.g., "I thought it would

be good for our 'country kids' to have time to play with other children" and "I feel that the play sessions give the students not only 'work experience' but able to conduct it by themselves".

The main gain that parents saw was overwhelmingly more confidence and social skills for their children, e.g., "my two nieces were quite shy but really came out of their shell thanks to the uni students", "New activity ideas and a child that is much more happy around new people". Parents overwhelmingly indicated that the variety of activities is what they want to remain the same, e.g., "The activities are of high level and consistent each week". There was not much they wanted to be changed. The overall interpretation from the parent data is that the play sessions were viewed positively in a variety of ways.

There were a few limitations to the study most of which relate to research sample. Firstly, there was a lack of diversity in parent participants i.e., parents were from similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. This could be because of the location of where we recruited and factors like transport to and from play sessions were not offered. In future it would be valuable for students to interact with a wider diversity of parents so recruitment of parents needs to take into account the many factors that may limit the ability or desire to participate. Secondly, parent attrition rate was not particularly high however the inconsistency of attendance was and could have impeded students' abilities to form and maintain relationships.

There are also some limitations in relation to student participation. Firstly, student sample was very female dominated. This however, reflects the reality of student enrolment in early childhood programmes. Secondly, the sample included three students enrolled in a primary education course. The experiences and perceptions of these students could possibly be so different to those of the early childhood students that the results could be skewed. Another limitation around the student sample was to do with how much students actually participated. Whilst there were tasks that students participated in that were assessable items for the subjects they were enrolled in, some chose to be more actively involved than others. Lecturers did not have control over how much students chose to participate.

Generally all aspects of play sessions were rated highly which indicates that students found the experience valuable and contributed to their learning in a positive way. This supports the use of experiences that mirror "real world" situations in building pre-service teachers' confidence (Botsman, 2002). These findings provide support for the value of on-campus scaffolded practical experiences which emphasise student interactions with both children and parents. These on-campus experiences, in contrast to isolated practicum places, provided easy access for students and could be more immediately followed up by group reflection with the assistance of lecturers.

Through this pilot project a larger study will be implemented in which student-parent-relationships will be strategically scaffolded by planning weekly informal discussions with parents around issues of positive guidance. Students will take a more active role in leading parent discussion groups around topics that parents identify as those most interested in. There will also be a larger focus on students and parents developing guidance skills with children. This larger study will

strive to continue and enhance the practical learning experiences of rural university students and build community university relationships.

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