A young woman is shown from the chest down, wearing a light blue denim jacket over a white t-shirt. She has a grey backpack on her back and is holding a stack of three books (two white, one pink) in her left hand. She is also holding a white cord in her right hand. The jacket has several small watermelon-shaped pins on it. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

# Employers' perspectives of early childhood graduates

Wendy Boyd, Marianne Fenech, Linda Mahony, Sandie Wong, Jane Warren, I-Fang Lee & Sandra Cheeseman

# Quality early learning

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket. The background is a solid blue color.

- Quality early learning environments for children's optimal development and wellbeing (O'Connell, Fox, Hinz, & Cole, 2016; Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015)
- Early childhood teachers (ECT) are one of the strongest predictors of quality that impacts favourably on children's educational outcomes (Manning, Wong, Fleming & Garvis, 2019).

# What about EC teacher quality?

- ECT staffing requirements (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018) and strategies to increase the supply of ECTs
- But what of the quality of early childhood initial teacher education (ITE) programs as a contributor to teacher efficacy (Couse & Recchia, 2016).



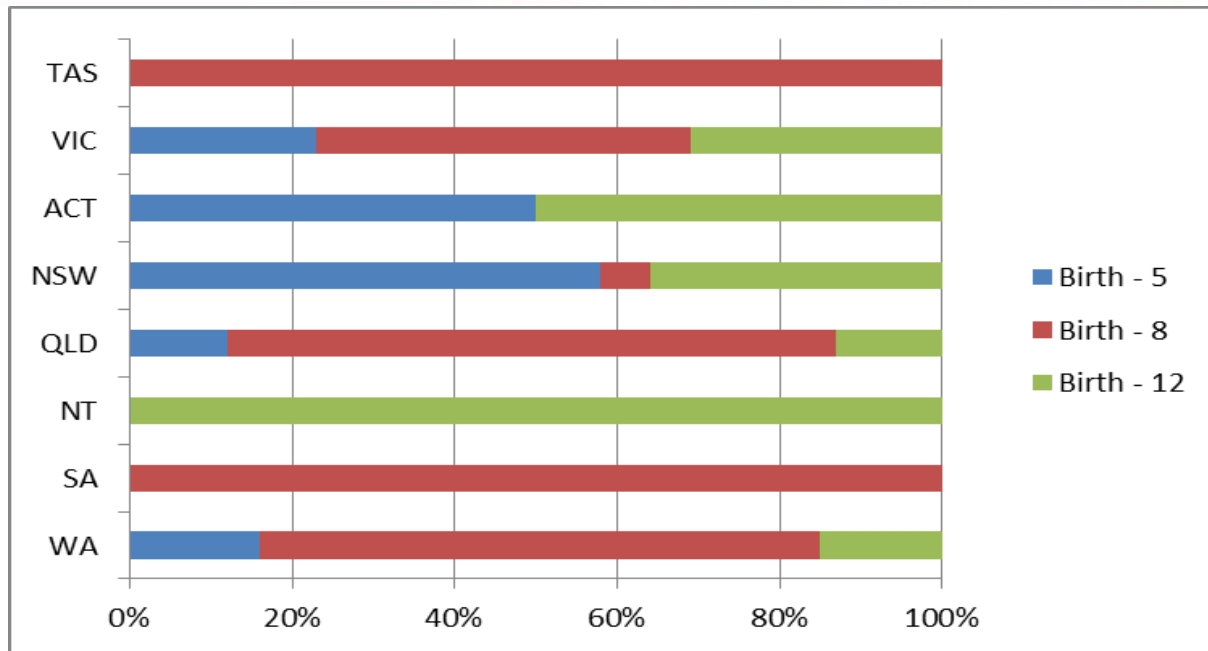
# Significance of study

Whitebook and Ryan (2011) argue that *“too much attention has been given to debating the baseline of qualifications required of preschool teachers ... failing to take into account the precise nature of the education that teachers have received en route to their degrees”* (p. 1).





# Overview of ITE programs for ECTs in NSW and ACT, Australia



Early childhood ITE programs accredited by ACECQA, 2012-June 2017  
(Fenech, 2017)

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket. The background is a solid blue color.

# Background to study

Some birth-12 programs have only seven of the 32 (22%) units of study devoted to ECEC (Boyd & Newman, 2019), while others embed early childhood education content throughout the entire program.

Implications of this variable provisioning and program coverage on preparedness of ECT graduates has yet to be investigated.

# Program of research

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

This program of research aim to address the gap in ECT preparedness by investigating the perceptions of

- (i) ECT graduates,
- (ii) academic coordinators of EC ITE programs, and
- (iii) employers of ECTs, regarding how well prepared they consider ECT graduates are to teach in the early childhood sector in Australia

# Questions:

Do ECT programs offer the requisite depth of knowledge and experiences relevant to the early years?

Do academic staff teaching on such programs have the necessary ECE expertise and experience?

Do tertiary institutions have the capacity to ensure these programs reflect current research of the early childhood sector ?

(Early & Winton, 2001; Rowley et al., 2011; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011)





A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books and a laptop. The background is a solid blue color.

## Research aim

To investigate employers' perceptions of early childhood teacher graduates regarding preparedness to teach in the early childhood sector in Australia

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a light blue denim jacket over a white shirt. The books have various colored spines, including white, pink, and purple. The background is a solid blue color.

# Theoretical framework

The study is a qualitative interpretive investigation with human understanding of a social phenomenon at its centre (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The theoretical approach guiding this research was that employers' unique perspectives of the preparedness of ECTs are shaped by their experiences in the field within their leadership roles.

# Participants

19 employers were purposefully selected (Patton, 2015)

	Small (less than 10 centres)		Medium (10-49 centres)		Large (more than 50 centres)	
For-profit	5 centres	14 teachers	nil	nil	943 centres	1100 teachers
Not-for-profit	14 centres	36 teachers	76 centres	195 teachers	130 centres	300 teachers
Total	19 centres	50 teachers	76 centres	195 teachers	1073 centres	1400 teachers

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

# Ethics approval

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from Southern Cross University's Ethics Committee, approval number: **ECN-18-134**

Prior to commencement of the interviews, participants were provided with a detailed information sheet and signed a consent form.

# Data collection



Semi-structured interviews were conducted with probing for further information (Berg, 2004).

Sample questions:

- On a scale of 1-10 how well prepared do you think EC teachers are? Can you explain your response?
- In what ways/areas are ECTs well prepared?
- In what areas are ECTs not well prepared?
- In NSW there are teacher programs for ECTs from Birth-5 years, Birth-8 years and Birth-12 years. Do you see any difference in the graduates from these courses?



# Data analysis

A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The books have various colored spines, including white, pink, and purple. The background is a solid blue color.

Data qualitative analysis was iterative across four stages, employing practices of qualitative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Stage 1: five interviews hand-coded and checked

Stage 2: remaining data coded by the other six researchers using pre-populated codes and corresponding quotes and comments.

Stage 3: analyses combined under the existing master codes and new codes.

Stage 4: codes grouped into inductive categories or 'key themes' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017)

# Six key findings

1. Participants' ratings on how well prepared ECT graduates are for EC teaching
2. Areas ECTs are well-prepared
3. Areas ECTs are less well-prepared
4. Preference in undergraduate degree focus
5. Employment, induction and support of new graduates
6. Connection between university, regulatory bodies and 'the EC field'.



# Finding 1: How well prepared are ECT graduates?

- Ratings ranged from 3.5 – 9/10 and averaged 6/10
- Several ( $n=8$ ) participants believed most prepared ECTs had articulated through the system, from Cert III or Diploma to Degree,



A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket. The background is a solid blue color.

## Finding 1: Preparedness

*I think there are two types of newly graduated teachers... the graduates who have left school and gone straight into their teaching degree. My experience and my view are that those teachers are not as well equipped or experienced as the graduates who have gone through the early childhood system ... have previously done their diploma then gone on and studied their degree...(SNFP)*

## Finding 2: Areas in which ECTs are well-prepared for the work

- All ( $n=19$ ) participants noted positive aspects of new graduates:
  - enthusiastic about their role;
  - focused and with *energy*;
  - high levels of professionalism;
  - were inquisitive, willing and committed to learn more.





## Finding 2: Areas in which ECTs are well-prepared for the work

*From the ones that I've seen, a good awareness of, cultural issues, or just more aware of issues in the community, open mindedness – develop an understanding of unique needs...they're more open...It could be the younger generation is more accepting and more inclusive. (SFP)*



A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket. The background is a solid blue color.

## Finding 3: *Areas ECTs are less well prepared*

- ECTs lacked skills, knowledge and understanding including child development knowledge ( $n = 3$ ) and social emotional development.
- Ten participants had concerns that ECT graduates lacked capacity to conduct child observation, programming, planning, pedagogical documentation of children's learning.
- Some ( $n= 3$ ) participants mentioned that ECT graduates have limited capacity to articulate their practice to families

A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The background is a solid blue color.

## Finding 3: *Areas ECTs are less well prepared*

Unprepared ECT graduates (N=19)

- the capacity to put theory into practice ( $n = 19$ ). Noted for work with children aged birth to three years ( $n = 7$ ) and children with additional needs ( $n = 1$ ).

*I think the level of how theory works in practice is lacking. They are not ready, particularly LDC more than preschool, they are not ready for the younger children—things like toilet training. (MNFP)*

A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The background is a solid blue color.

## Finding 3: *Areas ECTs are less well prepared*

Teamwork and critical reflective capacity

- *You might have that knowledge of what you think children should be doing but there's a lot of key decision makers in an early learning environment that means you're not the only one and so finding a voice and also feeling confident in your knowledge is still something that takes time to develop for new grads. (LNFP)*

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

## Finding 3: *Areas ECTs are less well prepared*

- *It seems like they understand the EYLF and the NQS, but don't understand why they teach the way they do, or what influences their practice—they are unable to recognise or articulate their personal philosophies (MNFP)*



A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The background is a solid blue color.

### Finding 3: *Areas ECTs are less well prepared*

Knowledge of pedagogical practices missing including music, singing, puppets and blocks in practice ( $n = 7$ ).

*I do see a lack of music happening. We are more likely to see the CD go on. There is still a place (and I don't see it very often) for a group of children to get together and be galloping and skipping and hopping.*

## Finding 4: Preference in undergraduate degree

The majority of participants ( $n = 11$ ) indicated a strong preference for degrees that focused on the birth to five age range. As one participant exclaimed:

- *Please bring back the birth to 5! (LNFP)*
- Concerns with degrees birth-12. Several ( $n = 6$ ) thought there was lack of attention to the birth to five age group



## Finding 4: Preference in undergraduate degree

*There has to be a fundamental difference between someone who focussed on EC at the University for four years compared to someone who does a span of birth to twelve. There has to be a difference. The courses I have looked at are heavily laden toward the school curriculum, compared to someone who has really focussed on EC in education. (LNFP)*



## Finding 5: Employment, induction and support of new graduates

- Five organisations chose to facilitate the transition of ECTs by supporting Diploma qualified educators to attain their degree
- Frustrated that whilst have responsibility inducting ECTs, they felt they need to provide 'remedial' professional development on topics such as child development, that the graduates should know.





## Finding 5: Employment, induction and support of new graduates

*We don't necessarily expect them to have an understanding of the regs. I think we can do that. But we don't think our job is to be teaching foundational, child development and how it applies as a teacher, but our experience is, we're having to do that.*





## Finding 6: Connection between university, regulatory bodies and 'the field'.

- Wanted universities to build connections with services that help put theory into practice for students.

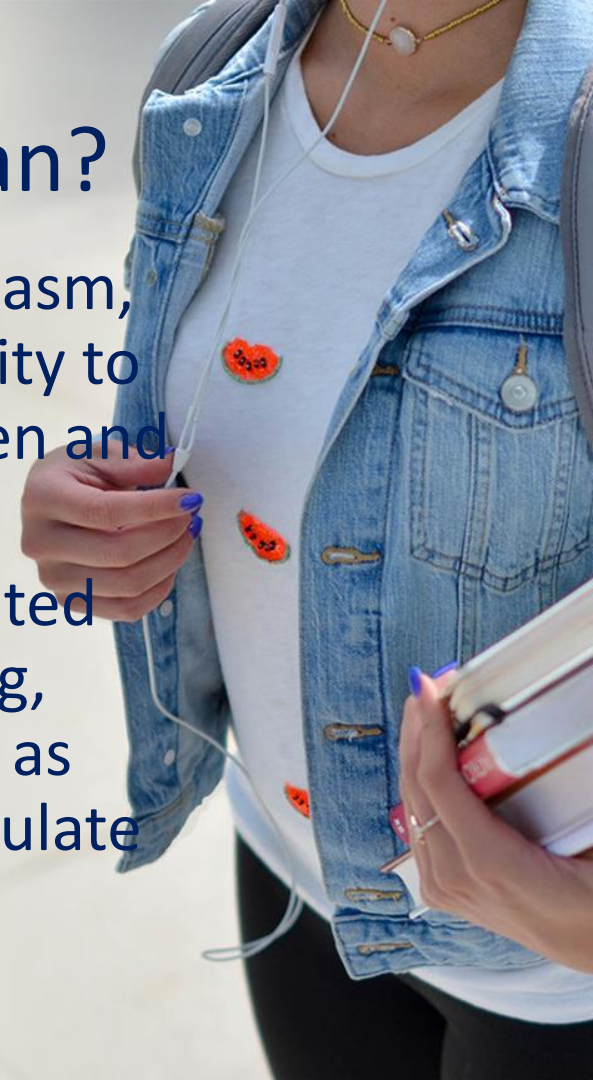
*How do we have more ongoing discussion between the institutions and the employers and really understand that what you're currently designing and its intent and our version of, what does that mean in a workplace, and how do we then make sure we're bridging the gap? (LFP)*



# Discussion- what does this mean?

Overall participants recognised the enthusiasm, professionalism of new graduates, and ability to interact and form relationships with children and families.

But lack of knowledge was perceived inhibited practices in child observation, programming, planning, and pedagogical documentation; as well as new graduate ECTs' abilities to articulate their practice to families



# Discussion- what does this mean?

New ECT graduates need to be 'job ready', but participants felt that that current ITE programs fell short of preparing such graduates.

Participants advocated for more professional experience in early childhood settings so graduates are better prepared to translate theory into practice- funding implications



# Discussion- what does this mean?

Being prepared to 'hit the ground running' was regarded as essential but was not always evident – contributing to two of the participating organisations choosing not to employ new graduates.

Concerns about ITE programs, especially those for birth-12 teaching, which were falling short of these employer expectations of ECT graduates.





# Discussion- what does this mean?

Graduates had lack of focus on the early years from birth-12 years' degrees: concern that these graduates were neither committed to, nor want to work in, early years' services. Aligns with previous research of pre-service teachers' perspectives of why they chose the birth-12 degree (Boyd & Newman, 2019; Gibson et al, 2017).





# Conclusions

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of several books. The person is wearing a denim jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

- This is small-scale study focused on organisations operating in NSW: not representative of Australian ECT workforce.
- Significant variation in degrees with no link to participants' views of specific ITE programs.

# Conclusions

A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The books have various colored spines, including white, pink, and purple. The background is a solid blue color.

Further investigation of ECT programs and other factors that influence ECT graduate preparedness such as

- teacher dispositions,
- content,
- professional experience,
- pedagogical approaches and the
- varied contexts (Nuttall, 2018).

Future research required to track ECTs around their preparedness for working in the EC sector

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