

Can we work together?

Preliminary findings from an examination of ECE and teacher dynamics in full-day early learning-kindergarten

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About the study...

Who are the educators working in Ontario's new Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program?

Designated early childhood educators working in FDEL-K classrooms must be registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators. They must have completed at least a 2-year college diploma in Early Childhood Education; however, many also hold bachelor's degrees in child study, psychology and other fields related to child development. Early childhood educators are governed under the *Early Childhood Educators Act*.

Kindergarten teachers are registered with the Ontario College of Teachers. Primary/junior certifications enable teachers to teach all of the grades from JK to Grade 6. All teachers must have a minimum of a 3-year post-secondary degree, in addition to a teaching certificate obtained from completing at least one year of study in a faculty of education. Teachers are governed under the *Education Act*.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the teaching structure taken by early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers in Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten classrooms.

Why look at teacher structure?

In early years classrooms, teamwork between educators often occurs in either a hierarchical or a co-teacher relationship (Shim, Hestins & Cassidy, 2004). In a **hierarchical relationship** one teacher acts as the lead teacher and the other takes on an assistant role. In a **co-teacher relationship**, both teachers equally share classroom responsibilities. After controlling for level of teacher education, program quality is **higher in co-teacher classrooms** (Shim et al.).

Furthermore, within integrated early years settings, increased collaboration between educators is related to greater program quality (Corter et al., 2007) and amongst preschool teachers, a greater sense of collegiality predicts more positive attitudes towards teaching (McGinty, Justice, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Overall, given that an increased sense of collaboration between ECEs and kindergarten teachers may contribute to greater program quality in FDEL-K classrooms, it is important to examine how the early learning partners in these classrooms work together and balance responsibilities.

How is the teaching structure described in the curriculum?

According to the FDEL-K *Reference Guide for Educators*, each educator is expected to bring his or her own unique strengths and professional training to the program in a “collaborative and complementary” partnership (p. 10). In addition to joint responsibility for delivering daily activities, extending children’s learning, organizing the learning environment, monitoring and assessing children, and working with parents, there are also specific roles outlined for each educator (see below). How does this outline for professional teamwork actually play out in real classrooms?

Kindergarten Teacher	Early Childhood Educator
<p>“Recognizing their unique qualifications and experiences, teachers are responsible for elements of the learning-teaching process that they have under <i>The Education Act</i> and related regulations. Through their pre-service and in-service education, teachers possess a unique knowledge set related to the broader elementary program context, curriculum, assessment, evaluation and reporting, and child development.</p> <p>Teachers are also responsible for student learning, effective instruction, formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation of the learning of the children enrolled in their classes, the management of early learning kindergarten classes and formal reporting and communication with families about the progress of their children. Teachers evaluate student learning and report to parents based on the early learning professional team’s assessments of children’s progress within the context of the <i>Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program</i>.”</p>	<p>“Based on their unique qualifications and experiences, early childhood educators bring their knowledge of early childhood development, observation and assessment.</p> <p>ECEs bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote each child’s physical, cognitive, language, emotional, social and creative development and well-being, providing opportunities for them to contribute to formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation of the children’s learning.</p> <p>Early childhood educators will also use their knowledge base and abilities as they implement the integrated extended day.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Ontario MOE, 2010</i></p>

Challenges in integrated staff teams – potential for a hierarchy

Integrating outside personnel into elementary schools can produce challenges in terms of defining professional “turf” (McMahon et al.; Corter et al., 2007), and in the physical sharing of classroom space and resources (Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Issues of changing professional identity, and understanding of the roles of other professionals working within integrated staff teams are also sources of tension (Cortner et al., 2007). School support in the form of effective principal leadership appears to strengthen integration of staff teams (Cortner et al., 2007; Desimone et al., 2004; Wagner & French, 2010) suggesting the need for a deeper understanding of how integration is taking place in FDEL-K classrooms.

Both childcare and kindergarten teachers report that their respective fields are characterized by differences in pay, working conditions, education and prestige (Johnson & Mathien, 1998). Moreover, when professionals from different disciplines collaborate, there is the potential for the professional with greater access to symbolic resources (e.g., pay and prestige) to dominate the other (Calander, 2000). When child care professionals were integrated into primary classrooms in Sweden as “recreation instructors”, for example, these professionals ended up taking on the role of a teaching assistant (Calander, 2000). Furthermore, in Toronto First Duty, concerns regarding a status hierarchy persisted amongst some early childhood educators working alongside kindergarten teachers (Cortner et al., 2007). Overall, more research is needed on whether early childhood educators maintain their professional identity within FDEL-K classrooms, as kindergarten teachers are advantaged in terms of their education, level of pay and familiarity within a school environment compared to early childhood educators.

Research questions

This study attempted to address the following three research questions:

1. Do early childhood educators feel less supported within the school community compared to kindergarten teachers?
2. How do kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators differ in their view on the sharing of classroom responsibilities within FDEL-K classrooms, and do they form a hierarchical teaching relationship?
3. How has working in FDEL-K changed the teaching practices of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers?

Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative, paper-and-pencil survey design, with self-administered surveys distributed to early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers working in FDEL-K classrooms. The participants rated their answers to questions on a 5-point Likert scale, and also completed three short written-response questions.

Participants

Surveys were completed by 28 ECEs and 32 teachers (response rate 92.4%) working in two school boards in Southern Ontario. Participants were drawn from a convenience sample that is part of a larger study on the effectiveness of Best Start and Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten by Dr. Janette Pelletier. Participants were recruited from seven elementary schools offering Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten for the first time in the 2010/2011 school year. All participants received a \$5.00 gift card to a coffee shop as a token of appreciation.

Data analysis

The quantitative responses were coded numerically and entered into a SPSS database. Percentages of responses to the survey questions were calculated and compared for both groups of educators. Further analysis to determine statistical significance in responses will also be calculated. The participants' qualitative responses have yet to be coded; however, major themes from the responses will be coded and compared numerically.

Survey Questions

Set 1: Questions relating to perceptions of school support

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. My professional training is valued by our school administration.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I get positive recognition by our school community (such as parents and staff) for the work that I put into the program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. In our school, the role of the Early Childhood Educator (ECE) is understood as being clearly different from that of a Teaching Assistant.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The school environment is welcoming to ECEs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Set 2: Questions relating to teaching structure (i.e., hierarchical vs. co-teacher)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5. Compared to my early learning partner, I have more authority in the classroom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I tend to delegate tasks to my early-learning partner throughout the school day	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Compared to my early learning partner, I have less of an influence on the outcome of decisions affecting our program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. I often act as an assistant to my early learning partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. My partner and I discuss changes to the classroom arrangement or schedule before we implement them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Set 3: Questions relating to teaching responsibilities within the classroom

<i>For each responsibility, indicate whether this responsibility is mostly that of the ECE, shared equally between both educators, or is mostly the responsibility of the teacher.</i>					
	Entirely ECE		Equally Shared		Entirely Teacher
Student learning	1	2	3	4	5
Formative assessment of children	1	2	3	4	5
Daily planning of age-appropriate activities	1	2	3	4	5
Creating long-term program plans	1	2	3	4	5
Informal communication with parents	1	2	3	4	5
Caring for children's physical and emotional needs	1	2	3	4	5
Facilitating children's social interactions	1	2	3	4	5
Scaffolding children's learning through play	1	2	3	4	5
Providing effective instruction to students	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluation of student learning	1	2	3	4	5
Management of the early learning	1	2	3	4	5

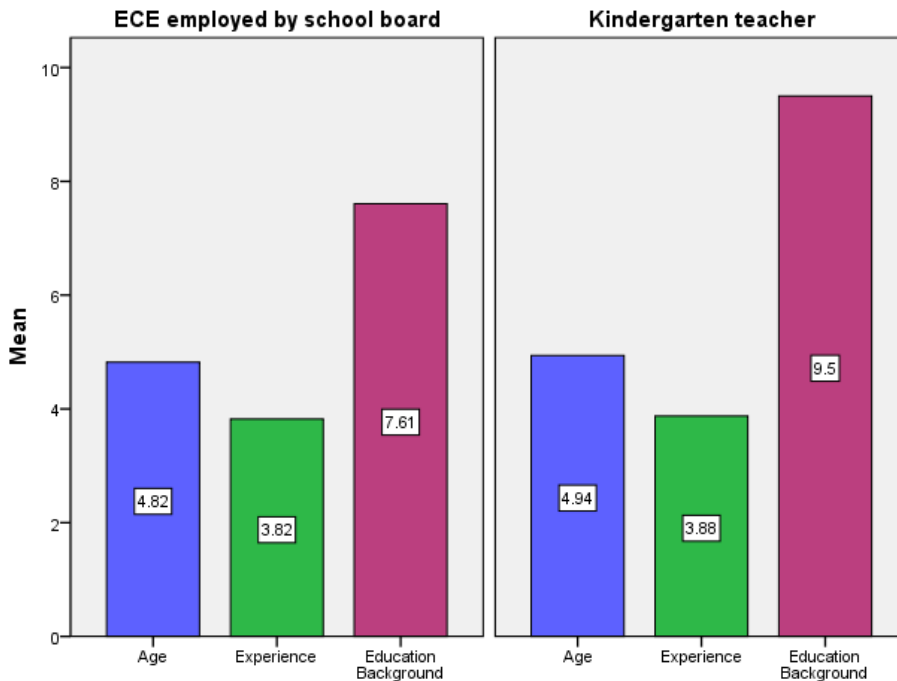
kindergarten class					
Formal reporting to parents on children's progress	1	2	3	4	5
Assisting children with daily routines (e.g., snack, dressing for outdoor play)	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing the learning environment	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding the broader curriculum	1	2	3	4	5

Set 4: Written response questions

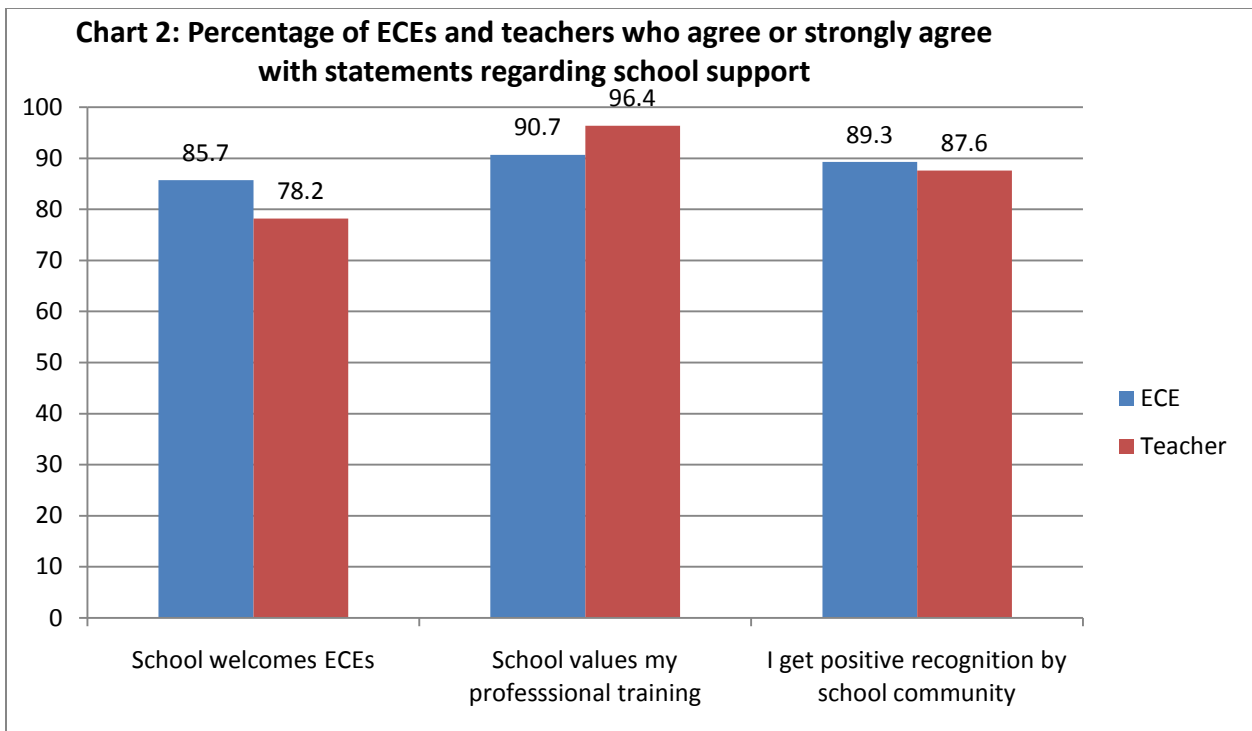
- How would you describe what your approach to teaching young children was prior to working in the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program?
- How has your approach to teaching young children changed since you began working in the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program?
- In what areas would joint professional training help to promote increased collaboration between ECEs and kindergarten teachers?

Results

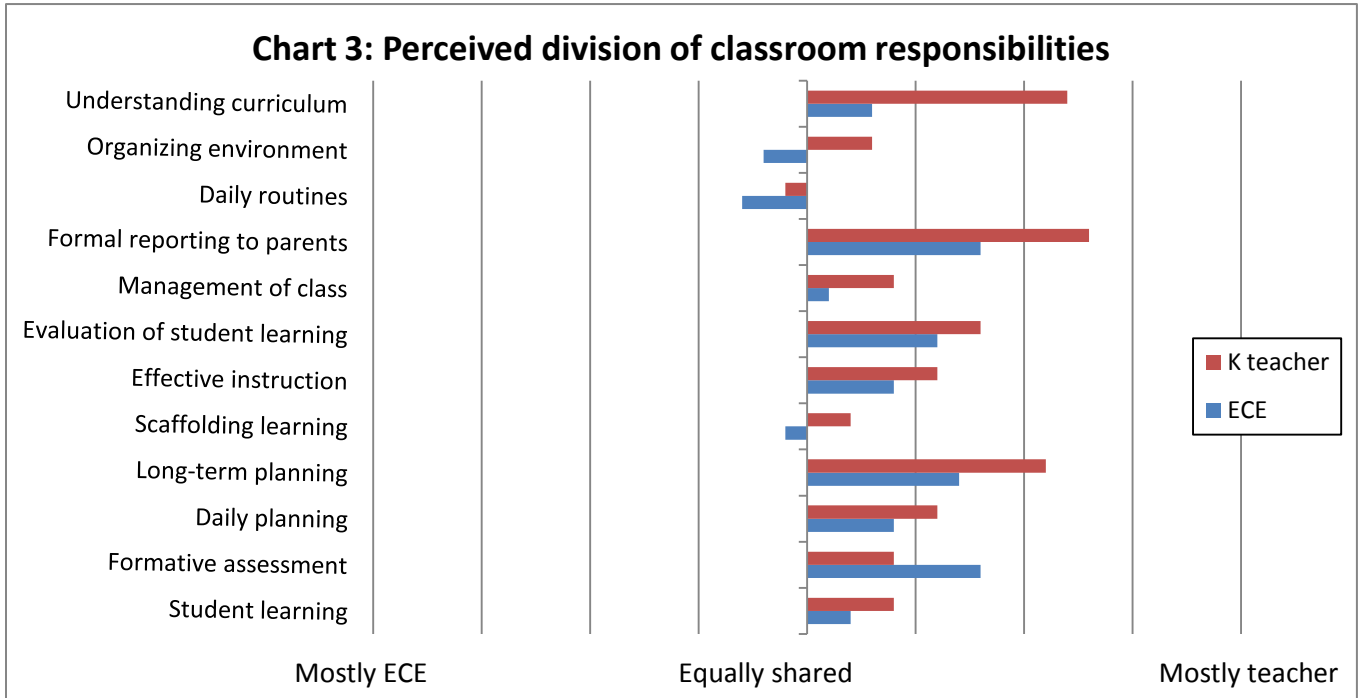
Chart 1: Demographic Comparisons of ECE and Kindergarten Teachers



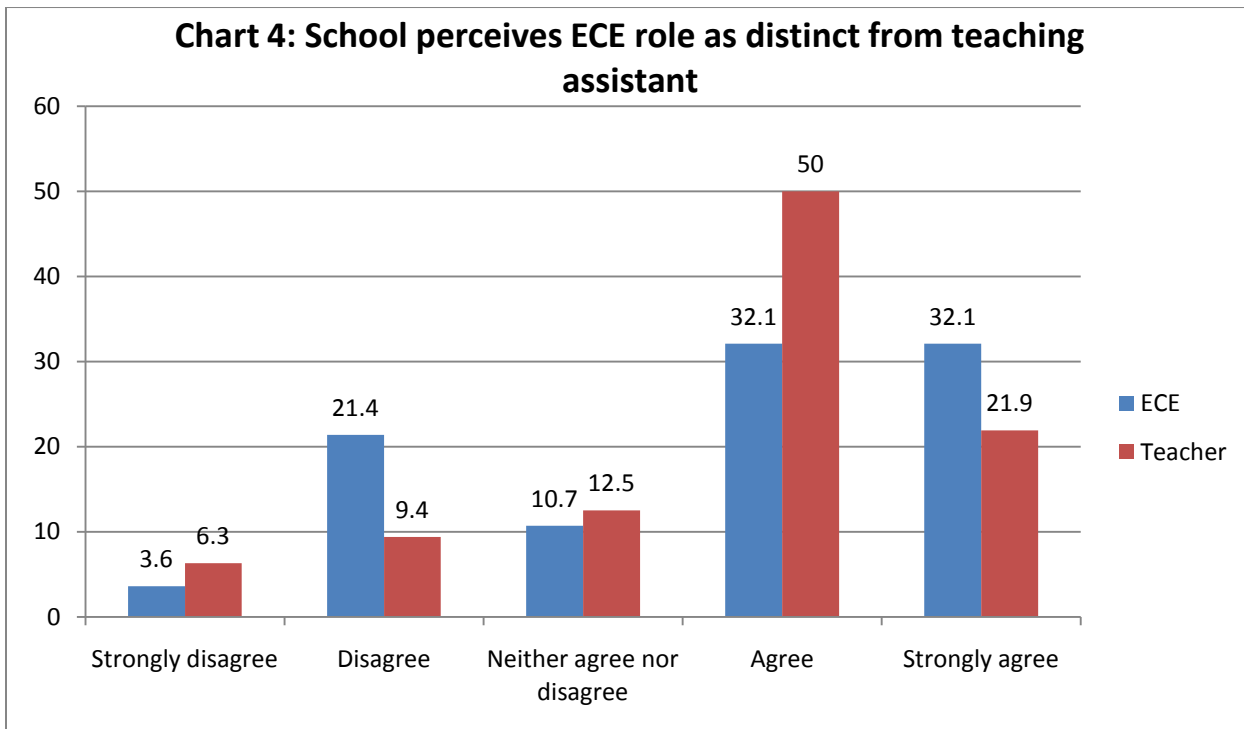
Although similar in age and experience in their respective fields, kindergarten teachers on average had obtained a higher level of education compared to ECEs.



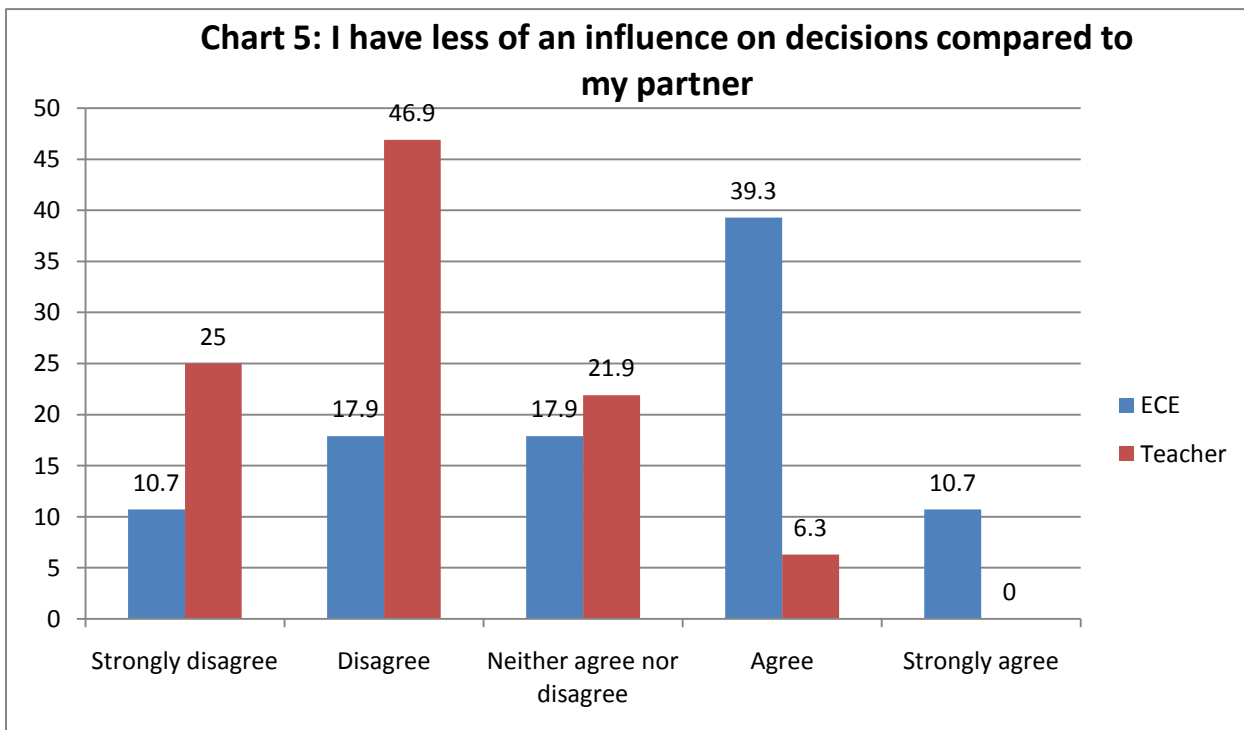
ECEs and kindergarten teachers indicate that schools are supportive of early years teachers, with a large majority of both groups indicating that schools were welcoming to ECEs, that their administration valued their professional training, and that they received positive recognition by parents, staff and other members of the school community.



Although both groups of professionals indicated that the kindergarten teachers had slightly more responsibility within the classroom, ECEs reported a more even sharing of responsibilities relative to kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers reported themselves as having more responsibility. Overall, this suggests that more training is needed on the complementary role of each educator within the classroom.

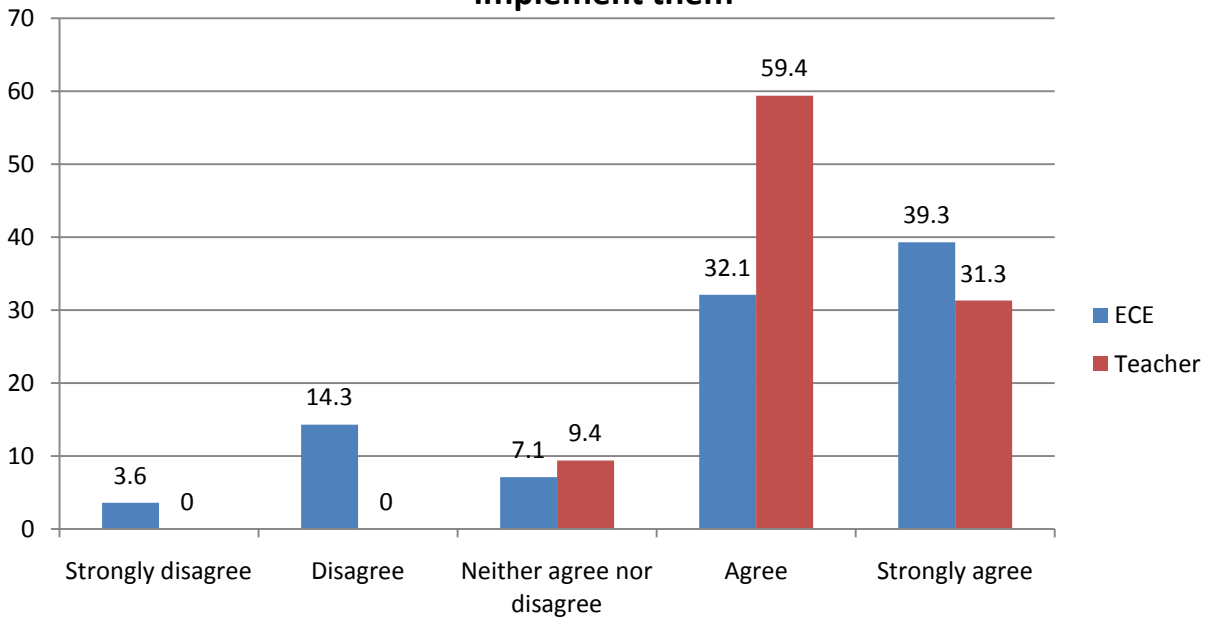


64.2% of ECEs and 71.9% of teachers either agree or strongly agree that the ECE role is understood as being distinct from a teaching assistant within their schools. However, a quarter of ECEs (25%) and 15.7% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, indicating that further clarification of the ECE role within the school is needed.



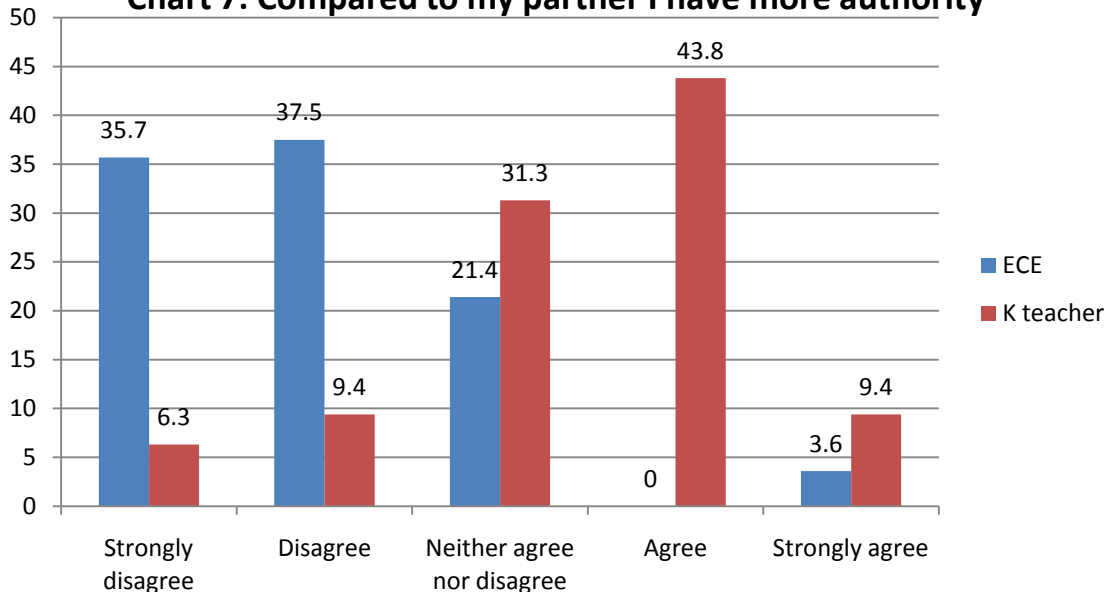
ECEs were more likely to agree that they have less of an influence on the outcome decisions affecting their program relative to kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers were more likely to disagree with this statement.

Chart 6: My partner and I discuss changes before we implement them



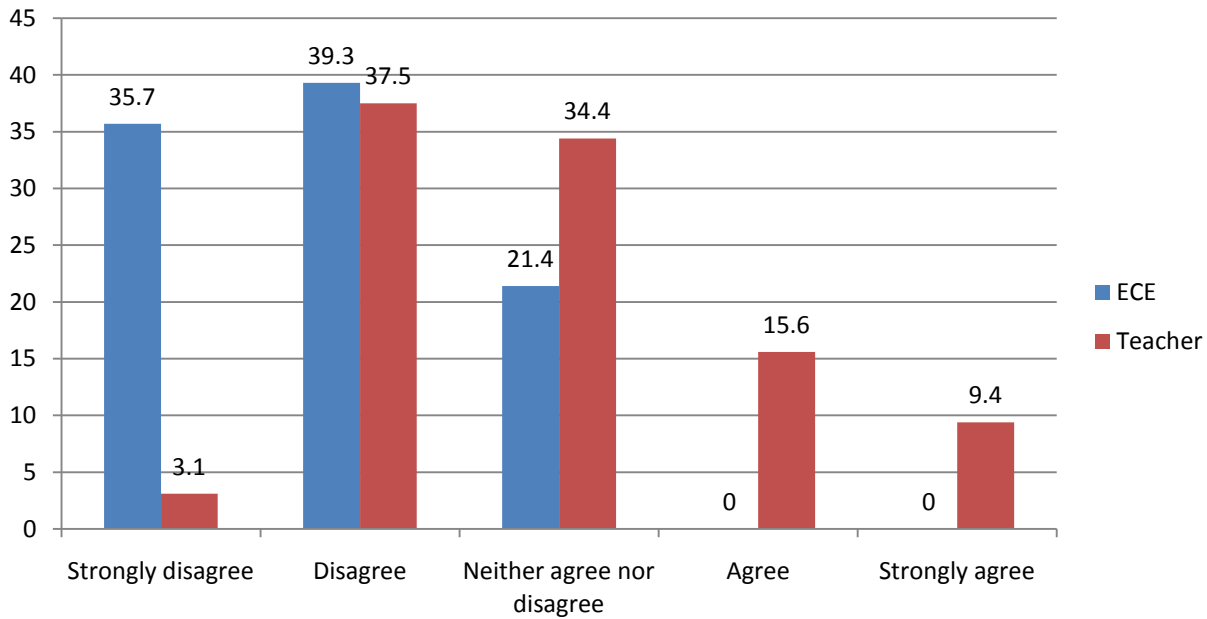
ECEs and kindergarten teachers appear to differ slightly in their views about whether they discuss changes to their classrooms before implementing them. 90.5% of kindergarten teachers compared to 71.4% of ECEs agreed with this statement.

Chart 7: Compared to my partner I have more authority



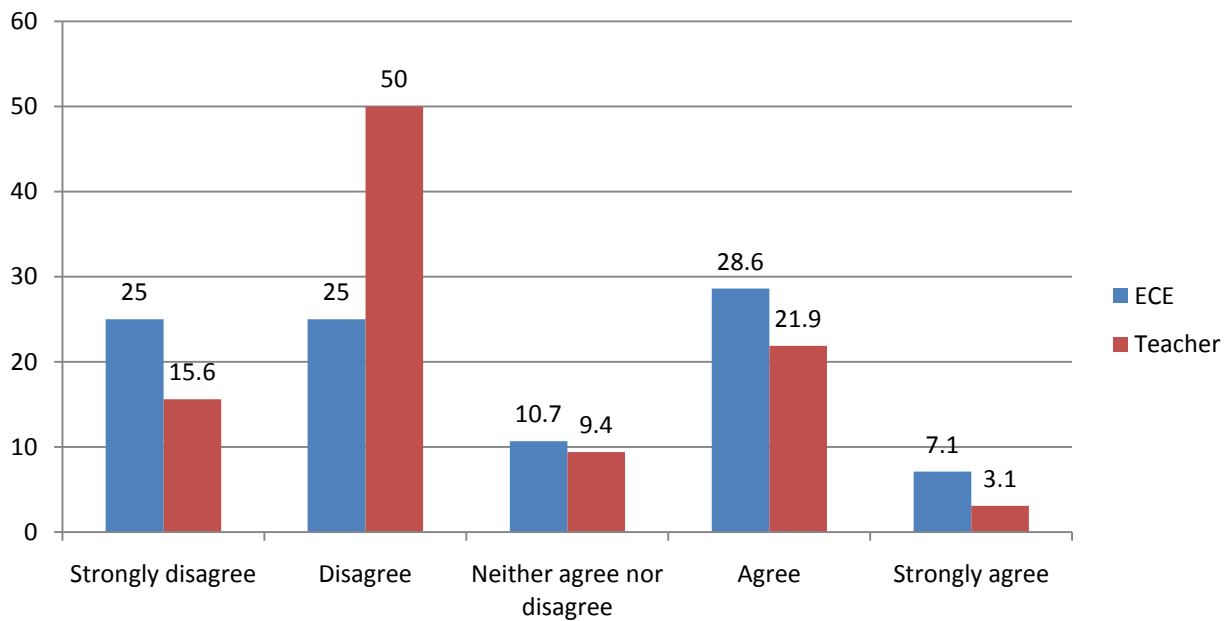
Nearly three-quarters of the ECEs (73.2%) disagreed with the statement: "compared to my early learning partner I have more authority in the classroom", while just over half of the kindergarten teachers (53.2%) agreed with it.

Chart 8: I tend to delegate tasks to my early learning partner



One quarter of teachers agree that they delegate tasks to the ECEs in their classrooms. No ECEs reported delegating tasks to their early learning partner.

Chart 9: I act as an assistant to my partner



A greater percentage of kindergarten teachers relative to ECEs disagreed with the statement “I often act as an assistant to my early learning partner”.

In their own words...

Many ECEs and kindergarten teachers expressed that they enjoy working in a team:

“My approach has remained the same but I feel more supported in my program”
– *kindergarten teacher*

“At this time I am so very happy with the teacher I work with and I feel we collaborate continuously. I would love training on any topic around play based learning to help enhance an already fantastic team/partnership” – *ECE*

“We have had a very successful joint collaboration. The ECEs have brought forth many great ideas and are willing to help out in all aspects of the program”
– *kindergarten teacher*

Both groups of professionals also expressed that their pedagogical practice improved as a result of working together:

“Not changed, but grown, flourished and expanded. I have always believed and been truly passionate about “playing to learn”. I have seen children learn math, numeracy, language and literacy skills through play. I have seen them develop in all the domains through play.” – *kindergarten teacher*

“I have become much more flexible in my approach to teaching. I have realized that for example, cutting play dough into cookie shapes and then taking those cookies to the drama centre to ‘bake’ is a wonderful learning opportunity!” – *ECE*

Many ECEs expressed concerns about feeling unequal or misunderstood:

“ECEs deserve more respect in terms of their knowledge of child development. If teachers and ECEs are not treated equally in terms of pay and responsibilities no training is going to work as long as there is a clear distinction and hierarchy” -
ECE

“As an ECE we have always worked with other ECEs in the room. Therefore working collaboratively has always been part of our job. Teachers have not necessarily had the same opportunity in the past. I have had to let go some of my visions for the program to ensure solidarity amongst myself and the

teacher... we have been told at all of our professional development that we are equal, equal, equal and yet people will only hear what they want to hear.” – *ECE*

“Some teachers have difficulty cooperating and sharing their gifts/talents, time and responsibilities with the ECE; equally as a collaborative team. Some teachers view the role of the ECE as just an assistant teacher... not enough preparation or planning time with the kindergarten teachers and ECEs, coordinating planning time with the teachers is difficult since the teachers have scheduled preparation and planning time during school hours” – *ECE*

“I believe that information re: our studies and training in child development/past work experience may provide teachers an insight to how qualified we are. That we (ECE) understand that the most crucial years for absorbing knowledge, self regulation and importance of play happen during preschool – grade 1. Consistent, ongoing training to work in partnership [needed]” – *ECE*

Some teachers emphasized that ECEs need school-specific training to help them work in a more academic setting:

“Curriculum – ECEs do not know how to implement the curriculum into our program activities. Need to understand at school, we are here to teach children through activities that are directly related to the K curriculum” – *kindergarten teacher*

“I believe that training ECEs on how to assess children would further help the team to work together closely” – *kindergarten teacher*

Both groups emphasized the need for joint training and planning time together:

“Training about the curriculum and what play based means and the partnership it takes from the team to provide positive environment. There are too many egos still present with this collaboration of ECE and teachers. Having training together would be really beneficial as well as planning together” – *ECE*

“In a collaborative environment when the needs of the children can be met by more than one adult, it is easier to focus on academic structures and implementation... it might be good if teachers could get a day of instruction on what an ECE training and experience can contribute; as well, ECEs could get a

day to learn what teacher’s training and experience brings to the classroom (for the initial meeting)” – *kindergarten teacher*

Discussion

Do early childhood educators feel less supported within the school community compared to kindergarten teachers?

It appears that ECEs feel similar degrees of support within schools compared to kindergarten teachers. ECEs overwhelmingly indicated that they felt that their professional training was valued within the school, and that they were welcomed. Overall, the results in Chart 2 suggest that full-day early learning-kindergarten schools are supportive of their early learning staff.

How do kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators differ in their view on the sharing of classroom responsibilities within FDEL-K classrooms, and do they form a hierarchical teaching relationship?

Classroom responsibilities

The data in Chart 3 suggest that ECEs and kindergarten teachers differ somewhat in their perceptions of how the workload and responsibilities are shared within their classrooms. In particular, ECEs seem to view the division of responsibilities as being more evenly shared, while kindergarten teachers indicate that they have a greater share of the responsibility. A possible explanation for this finding could stem from ECE and kindergarten teachers’ different experiences with team teaching; ECEs having relatively more experience co-teaching and consequently may view their teaching role as being more of a shared one relative to the kindergarten teachers. Future research is needed to determine the cause of this discrepancy. Overall, these results suggest that more training may be necessary in order to help staff better understand their roles within FDEL-K classrooms.

Teaching structure

The results suggest that a hierarchical teaching structure is occurring in some FDEL-K classrooms, with nearly a quarter of ECEs surveyed disagreeing that their position is understood as being distinct from a teaching assistant within their schools (see Chart 4). Moreover, when asked about their teaching relationship, half of the ECEs surveyed agreed that they had less of an influence on program decisions relative to their teaching partner, and

17.9% disagreed that their partner discussed changes to the program before implementing them. As seen in Chart 7, over half of the kindergarten teachers agreed that they had more authority than their teaching partners, and in Chart 8, one quarter of kindergarten teachers report delegating tasks to their partners. Nearly 35% of ECEs report acting as an assistant to their teaching partner.

These results suggest that while hierarchical classrooms may not occur in *all* FDEL-K classrooms, this structure may be occurring in approximately one quarter to one third of these classrooms. Many ECEs expressed concerns regarding a hierarchy in their written responses, indicating that this discrepancy in status was bothersome to them. As collegiality is related to positive attitudes towards teaching (McGinty et al., 2008), it is important to consider how this hierarchy might affect the teaching quality of both ECEs and kindergarten teachers in FDEL-K. Lower education and salaries received by the early childhood educators relative to the kindergarten teachers may be contributing to this structure (Calander, 2000). Furthermore, a lack of joint planning time may also contribute to the ECE taking on an assistant role, given that the kindergarten teacher may plan classroom activities without the consultation of the ECE.

How has working in FDEL-K changed the teaching practices of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers?

Both early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers reported making improvements to their pedagogical approach. In particular, both groups reported increasing the use of play-based learning. A few professionals reported learning new strategies from their teaching partner, and benefitting by working in a partnership.

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