

POSITION PAPER

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

&

NOVA SCOTIA'S PRE-PRIMARY

PROGRAM



We submit this paper on behalf of CUPE members who are currently working in the classroom and those who work in the childcare environment as ECEs.

With a new, significant investment in Early Learning & Care injected into our schools, how best to ensure our children gain the most from it?

Factors worth considering

Nova Scotia's recently launched pre-primary program is an important and integral step towards creating a universal system of early learning and care. The Canadian Union of Public Employees promotes this on behalf of our over 650,000 members nationwide, many of whom are parents with young children. Across Canada, we also represent Early Childhood Educators mostly, in classrooms and in the non-profit child-care sector.

Research demonstrates there that there is not one singular factor that guarantees school readiness for preschoolers. Ratios, classroom size, classroom organization, staffing structure and remuneration can all play a significant role in providing environments that can benefit young children cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. (M. Friendly, C. Ferns, N. Prabhu, 2009).

The converse is thus also true: poor ratios and poor pedagogical preparation are key structural barriers to quality Early Childhood Education and Care.

What course of study provides the most in-depth instruction in play based learning

Contrary to the recent "Teachers' Position Paper", it is in fact Early Childhood Educators who are the most educated in the ever-important play based learning techniques. The Early Years' curriculum at Mount Saint Vincent University and its counterpart at the Nova Scotia Community College both include play based instruction; for Early Childhood Educators, most practicums are with young children. There is no such instruction or practicum required to obtain a two-year teacher's certificate and if there are classes focusing on pre-primary they are minimal.

Our pre-primary Early Childhood Educators are lauded by experts such as Professor Nancy Carlsson-Paige in her interview in the Washington Post (October 31, 2017 I saw a brilliant way to teach kids). Such recognition is well deserved. As she and other academics like Quebec's Christa Japel demonstrate, too often when the Early Years move into schools -- a didactic approach to learning becomes the norm -- because this is how teachers, teach.

What is didactic teaching

In her interview Carlsson-Paige explains what this means: "In the United States, standards emphasize small discrete bits of information that children should master for each subject area.

The items children are expected to learn have one right answer. Kids often memorize this information. All children are expected to learn the same thing at the same time.”

Dr. Christa Japel’s assessment of Quebec’s kindergarten program for 4 year olds, Les maternelles 4 ans: la qualité de l’environnement éducatif et son apport à la préparation à l’école chez les enfants en milieux défavorisés (Japel, 2017) provides the only research on pre-primary in the country and it should be mandatory reading for provincial departments of education considering full-day pre-primary.

Like our province, early pre-primary initiatives in schools in Quebec were initially designed to reach children who faced socio-economic hardships that created barriers to their success through-out their elementary and secondary school careers (Japel, 2017). Because of its initial impetus – helping vulnerable children -- assessing the degree to which pre-primary successfully “readies” young children for school – is important.

It is by now well known that investing in good quality early learning and care does a lot: a well-educated workforce translates into higher tax revenues, decreases pressure on social programs, and therefore offers an overall economic boost (See for example Toronto Dominion Special Economic Report, 2012).

Nova Scotia’s attempt to provide universal access is a significant investment of public funds (Churchill, 2017 <https://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20170801004>). So how best to do so when considering who might benefit most from it? Leveling the playing field is one of the more meaningful reasons for expanding education/public services. Let’s not forget what good governance can be when done right from the beginning. Universal early learning and care *at its best* benefits women, it boosts the provincial GDP, and it goes some measure to reducing class (and other) divisions as children meet, learn, and forge friendships with each other (Fortin, 2014). For these reasons, “knowing that the quality of pre-school services is a crucial prerequisite for fostering and preparing the most at-risk children (Japel, 2017).”

Lessons from the Quebec experience

The Quebec experience found that pre-primary taught by teachers in the schools, in terms of readiness for kindergarten (or grade primary), didn’t really prepare children as well as it could.

In Quebec, teachers deliver pre-kindergarten and “teachers need training in early childhood education and care (Japel, 2017).” Teachers are trained to be concerned about content first and foremost. Their training is theoretical. Taking literacy as an example: teachers will use the alphabet to teach it, while educators will teach in a play-based manner with letters and spelling activities found in games and toys, in a way that fosters inquiry, and is fun (Japel, 2017).

Les maternelles 4 ans raises several concerns. Ratios, classroom organization, appropriate programming, and teacher training.

1. Ratios are much higher in Quebec at one teacher to every 18 children.
2. Funding for the right design, materials, toys, books and learning corners needs to be “sufficient.”
3. More appropriately trained personnel in the classroom is required. This is to improve the attention paid to the development of children’s social skills particularly the need for age appropriate “activities and programs that would contribute positively to the development of the varied components for the child’s overall development (Japel; 2017).”
4. Japel’s assessment reports that even a four-year Bachelor program in elementary education offer few courses on pre-school or pre-primary education (Japel 2017). Her assessment includes recommendations that current training provided to teachers be evaluated; that continuing education should be based upon educational techniques and validated practices that meet the needs of 4-year-olds including courses that meet the needs of vulnerable students (Japel, 2017) along with training in the different components that affect the quality of the pre-primary environment (Japel, 2017).

Teachers are taught curriculum, pedagogical theory and instructional learning. Early childhood educators are specialists, trained to foster learning through exploration, creating an environment where children learn all around them and based on a developmentally appropriate program that is child initiated through, for example, Authentic Assessment techniques; educators nurture learning through constant observation – “scaffolding” off the child’s interests.

The Nova Scotia Context

Carlsson-Paige dreams of importing our approach, where the early years are taught by Early Childhood Educators, precisely because it is developmentally appropriate for young children. “The Nova Scotia Framework emphasizes *dispositions* for learning such as curiosity, creativity, confidence, imagination and persistence. It emphasizes processes such as problem solving, experimenting and inquiry.”

Pre-primary in Nova Scotia schools were piloted in 2005. Delivered by early childhood educators off-shoots and hybrids of the program developed and grew. The programs are led by an Early Childhood Educator with a four-year university degree and are supported by other early childhood educators depending upon class size.

In the first provincial evaluation of the Early Years Centres (Dalhousie University, 2015) “Early Childhood Educators within the EYCs were recognized as leaders in their field and champions for the play-based approach of the EYCs.”

The evaluation commends “the knowledge, expertise, commitment, and work ethic of the ECEs as key enablers in building a strong Early Learn Program (ELP). The importance of the ECEs being trained in early childhood development was acknowledged...and it was noted that this was critical to building an evidenced-based Early Learning Program (e.g. play-based learning, evidence based-documentation, reflective practice, etc.).”

Early Childhood Educators do more than nurture and educate in the areas of physical, social, emotional, cognition and language development. Equally important is the work they do supporting families and communities.

Noted in the second round of evaluations *Evaluation of the Nova Scotia Early Years Centres* (Dalhousie University, 2017) the authors remarked:

“Families felt valued for their input, connected and welcomed within schools and EYCs (over 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed). They considered EYC staff as warm and having a welcoming attitude, appreciating that staff took time to engage them, get to know them, and build a solid foundation for support, trust, and comfort. Families felt that the ‘laid-back’ approach taken by staff when issues arose made it easier to overcome, ensured privacy or confidentiality when needed, and exuded confidence in caring for their children. Families acknowledged that EYC staff deserved more recognition and appreciation, such as through a designated appreciation day for teachers, a poster or card created by children, or a Teacher of the Month award.”

Early Childhood Educators are trained in appropriate classroom design

According to Japel, the best learning environment requires attention and training spatially and temporally to allow for child initiated activities.

A typical class room for young children is bright, colourful, should include activity corners, little furniture that is non-hazardous, small, reachable bookshelves filled with age appropriate books, corners with blocks for motor activities (Japel, 2017).

Activities should be developmentally appropriate and offered in an explorative way, for example with costumes for symbolic play. A play-house, store, blocks figurines. Programs should include an opportunity for a nap for the many 3, 4 and 5-year-olds who need one as well as healthy food served in a setting that encourages children to enjoy eating; because a hungry and tired child is a child that cannot learn. The best early childhood programs feature substantial time spent in active play outdoors in an area equipped with a range of play and exploration options, and a variety of surfaces and materials. In Quebec, not all schools have this kind of space and some compensate by relying on the indoor gym (Japel, 2017).

Some of our schools are lucky enough to already have pre-primary programs led by ECEs and are equipped with designed classrooms so children can initiate and explore through their own

curiosity. Most new classrooms, however, are not. Where there have not been pre-primary programs or where the programming is expanding, there is a scramble for small furniture, appropriate play areas, even washrooms, precisely because schools are set up almost exclusively for instructional teaching for older students.

In response to the Maternelles 4 ans assessment, school boards in Quebec will be developing more appropriate training sessions for teachers throughout the year to help improve the program (Japel, 2017).

We're already one step ahead in Nova Scotia with ECEs leading the way, so let's build on that strong foundation.

Real Collaboration

The Ontario experience offers other valuable lessons. Cohabitation or team-teaching hasn't been easy precisely because when you have a teacher and an early childhood educator in a classroom there exists disparities: in training and experience on the one hand, and, on the other with salaries. Although there has been no in-depth review of the Ontario program anecdotal evidence suggests that this disparity leads to the predominance of more traditional — didactic — teaching.

Not surprisingly similar tensions arise here too. “Differences in pedagogical approaches, and experiences with “theme-based” programs compared with a play-based approach revealed a tension among some ECEs and school staff. However, some families shared that their perspective on play-based learning had changed because they saw positive changes in their child's development after attending the ELP. On-going support and discussions with partners, ECEs, school staff and families about the purpose and value of play-based learning was identified as a priority... (Dalhousie University, 2017)”

The Quebec assessment powerfully makes the case that investing in child care and early learning requires qualified people delivering a quality program. Other-wise, the educational advantages will not be there to the extent they could and should – and this is especially so for children who need it the most.

In other words, expanded access, something parents love, shouldn't jeopardize quality. As the head of the European Commission Directorate for Education and Culture remarked “it is becoming increasingly clear that access without quality is of little merit (Porkony, A. 2011).”

What else is important for quality early learning and care

Across the country 3, 4, and 5-year-olds in regulated early learning and care can find themselves, generally, in either centres or in the public-school system. Or sometimes both. Centres, typically are regulated by social service departments while primary programs are under Education ministries (Friendly, M. et al, 2009) and their approaches to ratio regimes and qualifications, are

somewhat distinct. In Nova Scotia, for example, while both are in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development staff to student ratios for 4-year-olds in centres is 1:8. In the public-school system it is 1:10.

Asking the key question “How do early years teachers excel at their crafts?” a review of the research literature on the effect of qualifications on quality and ECEC teacher behaviour by Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog found that the amount of teachers’ formal schooling had an impact on quality (correlational) as well as (less often) on effective teacher behaviour (Kontos, S. and Wilcox-Herzog, A. 2003). Citing Cassidy et al, and Kontos, et al in particular, they note that specialized education (that is, in early childhood education/child development) was found to be casually related to quality and correlated with positive teacher behavior. Citing studies across preschool age groups including 4 and 6-year-olds, the review noted that “there is a considerable amount of evidence that specialized education is related to quality of the learning environment for children and to the quality of teachers’ interactions with the children (Kontos, S. and Wilcox-Herzog, A. 2003).”

Other factors that impact student outcomes include teacher qualifications, class size, wages and working conditions though Friendly cautions that some of these studies she cites (Barnett, Schulman & Shore, 2004; Blatchford et al, 2003, Doherty & Stuart, 1997) observe that separating these factors to study independent effects is complicated.

Friendly, citing UNICEF’s Innocenti Research’s benchmarks quotes:

“...child: *trained* adult ratio for 4-5-year-olds in publicly subsidized, centre-based services not greater than 15:1 and group size not exceeding 24.” This benchmark specifies that the adults included in the ratio *should be trained or educated in early childhood learning and care* (Friendly et al 2009).

One final note. Citing Shim, Hestenes and Cassidy (2004), Friendly points out that classroom organization and staffing structure are also factors effecting student out comes. Co-teaching is associated with higher quality compared to either hierarchical teacher structures or a single teacher structure (Friendly et al, 2009).

To make early learning and care a real success more needs to happen immediately

For building a system, one that really makes sense to children and parents, the province will have to do more: it must, at the very least, provide wrap-around care for 4 year olds in the schools – even that would fall short of the best practice of a “seamless day” identified in the Fraser Mustard Report (Mustard, J.F, McCain, N., McCuaig, K., 2011).

As more children attend pre-primary, their absence leaves a void in licensed child care centres. The historical backbone of quality Early Learning and Care is found in the non-profit sector. Ensuring children ages 0-3 thrive in non-profit centres will require transformative change. We don’t have to look far to find good examples: when P.E.I. moved primary from centres into the

public-school system a long-term plan was initiated establishing a network of 45 licensed Early Year Centres with stable funding agreements. Fees were set by the province and a provincial curriculum and wage grid were implemented.

Furthermore, let's not forget, the Nova Scotia Review of Regulated Child Care Consultation Report and Recommendations (March 2016) acknowledged the lack of rural and infant access, as dire.

Addressing the topsy-turvy topography of early learning and care will require, as Christine Saulnier and Tammy Findlay, explain in their recent submission to Law Amendment in response to Bill 8:

1. Rolling various funding into one envelop out of which a comprehensive system can be built.
2. Funding a transition plan including a labour-force strategy that deals with the inequitable compensation and working conditions, recruitment strategies for remote areas, as well as funding to support infant and toddler care.
3. Ceasing public funding to commercial operators who charge on average 21% more. All existing centres should be offered the opportunity to become public centres. The profit motive should not remain part of the public funding calculus if we want high quality ECE.

Why the need for a “position paper” in response to a “position paper”

There's always a context when writing and publicly releasing “position papers” no matter how high the yen to academic neutrality may read. Let's not pretend research occurs in a vacuum. There are hundreds of new full-time, permanent, positions being created in school boards across the province, and, rightly or wrongly, new union members to be gained. Please remember, a scant time ago Nova Scotia teachers, not the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union leaders, but rank-and-file teachers, rejected not one but two tentative agreements contrary to the recommendations from their bargaining team.

The fulcrum of these spontaneous and historic protests was galvanized by one central issue: classroom size. Our CUPE Early Childhood Educators stood right alongside their colleagues, bolstering their numbers, supporting their demands, demonstrating their solidarity.

When the Nova Scotia Teacher's Union politicizes the care of young children, consider this: right now our pre-primary ratios, specialized training (that is, our educators with a four-year degree), and class-room staffing structure in our schools, is a model that is doing well according to the most current research in Canada, in terms of design, if not implementation.

Japel's study is a cautionary tale of a good idea badly implemented. Let's learn from our provincial predecessors and not make the same mistakes. Let's build on our good foundation and build a quality early learning and care *system*, a place where our children can flourish and grow, inside and outside of our schools.

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