

**Innovations in Provincial Early Learning  
Curriculum Frameworks**

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## Introduction

Since 1997, an unprecedented number of provinces have developed early learning curriculum frameworks<sup>1</sup>. Quebec's Ministry of Family and Children was the first to develop *Meeting Early Childhood Needs, Quebec's Educational Program for Childcare Services*<sup>2</sup> (1997), which drew upon and adapted the American High/Scope curriculum approach. The *Educational Program* was revised in 2007 to help childcare personnel and home childcare providers "update their role in a context that has undergone several changes in recent years" (Government of Quebec, 2007, p. 5). In December 2006, Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services completed *Early Learning for Every Child Today*, a curriculum and pedagogical framework for children from birth to age 8<sup>3</sup>.

In 2008, three frameworks were released. New Brunswick's Department of Social Development produced an English *Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum* and a *curriculum éducatif*, which stresses the importance of cultural belonging and integration, designed for francophones by francophones<sup>4</sup> (Government of New Brunswick, 2008). In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Education launched *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008) to the early learning and child care sector at

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of Manitoba, Ministry of Family Services and Consumer Affairs' early learning curriculum framework is in development.

<sup>2</sup> An English translation is used for this chapter. The educational guide is based on the program, *Jouer, c'est magique!* (Playtime is magical!) a Quebec version of the American High/Scope educational approach initially used as an intervention framework for disadvantaged children (Tougas, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> In Ontario, *Every Child, Every Opportunity* is a specific curriculum with learning outcomes for full day early learning programs for four and five year-old children.

<sup>4</sup> Personal Communication: Diane Lutes, Program Consultant, Early Childhood and School-Based Services, Program Development and Monitoring, Social Development, Government of New Brunswick.

a professional association conference. British Columbia's Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children and Family Development released an *Early Learning Framework*, "intended to guide and support early childhood educators, StrongStart facilitators, early years professionals, service providers, communities and governments" as well as inform families, kindergarten, primary school teachers/educators, and administrators (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 2).

This chapter describes and analyzes the development, purposes, and content of these provincial curriculum frameworks as well as highlighting the tools for practice that they offer. Attention will be given to particular theoretical perspectives articulated in the frameworks, and to examining how the frameworks address the critical issue of diversity within provincial contexts (Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Pence, 2006). An account of the implementation and evaluation of the curriculum frameworks in early childhood settings within each province will be provided as well as a discussion on what is needed to sustain the use of the frameworks by early childhood educators (Bennett, 2004).

### **Framework development**

It is not easy to discern the reasons why a significant number of provinces have recently produced early learning curriculum frameworks, the majority of which focus on services for young children birth to age four. What has made it possible to produce frameworks which function either as policy or as a regulation in these particular provinces at this point in time? In general, it can be said that development of the frameworks has not been clearly coordinated with other major policy changes to a province's delivery of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Only Quebec developed their 94-page educational program guide

for childcare centres and revised it ten years later as part of its publicly funded, coherent and regulated ECEC system.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, Canadian provinces had a benchmark: by 2004, most Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries had developed either pedagogical frameworks or curricula for children aged 3 to 6 at a national level or, in the case of Australia, at a federated state level (Bennett, 2004; Dickinson, 2006). Provinces had, as Bertrand (2007, p. 3) has noted, “a substantial and growing research base [which] points to the importance of a clear purpose, goals and approaches in establishing the what (curriculum) and how (pedagogy or educational strategies) in early learning and child care programs for preschool children”. The OECD<sup>6</sup>, in its evaluation of early childhood programming in Canada, recommended a national quality framework for early - childhood services across all sectors, which would include:

A statement of the values and goals that should guide early childhood centres...to facilitate development and learning, an outline of the knowledge, skills, dispositions and values that children at different ages can be expected to master across broad developmental areas; and... pedagogical guidelines outlining the processes through which children achieve these goals, and how educators should support them (OECD, 2004, p.11).

In 2004, the federal Liberal minority government sought provincial agreement on a Foundations program that would build a national, universal and regulated ECEC system with a quality framework (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). By 2005, all provinces had agreed to move forward and in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan

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<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication: Kathleen Flanagan, Montaque, PEI.

<sup>6</sup> New Brunswick did not participate in the OECD Canada Country of Note evaluation.

and Ontario, provincial framework development had begun, tied to federal funding targeted for early childhood services. In January 2006, the new Conservative government ended the Foundations program, and advocates' hopes for a quality framework at a national level were dashed (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). But New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Ontario chose to continue with their framework development despite a reduction in federal funding. In Saskatchewan, for example, the development of a common early learning program guide was a major feature of the province's Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) five-year plan developed in response to the federal 2005 ELCC Initiative. The plan was not released publicly when the federal government changed in 2006 and anticipated funding was discontinued after one year. However, the program guide was one of a number of policy initiatives the province of Saskatchewan continued to work toward.

One component of the 2004 Ontario Best Start strategy—a plan funded in part with federal dollars and designed to establish a coherent system for young children—was a Ministry of Children and Youth Services Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning. Ontario's 110-page curriculum framework emerged out of the panel's work but the Ministry did not publicly announce it as a new early childhood policy direction or mandate its use. However, the curriculum framework later became a central feature of the 2009 Premier's policy report on implementing early learning in Ontario.

In British Columbia, curriculum framework development emerged out of changes to the mandate of a Ministry. In 2005, the Ministry of Education's mandate was expanded to include early learning (children younger than kindergarten age) and one of the first policy actions the Ministry undertook in collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, which is

responsible for child care programs, was to articulate a common understanding and vision for early learning in a curriculum framework.

What is quite clear is that the work of committed individuals drove the development of frameworks. At the request of the British Columbia Ministry of Education, an Early Learning Advisory Group was established, and, as in Ontario and Saskatchewan, the involvement of both the ECEC and formal education sectors was intended to foster the integration of the traditional divide between care and education. The Government of New Brunswick Department of Social Development contracted a 25-member early childhood research and development team lead by Pam Whitty and Pam Nason at the Early Childhood Centre, University of New Brunswick to carry out the development of the province's early learning framework. Twenty-three research papers on various aspects of early learning and care curriculum informed the development of the framework and further changes were made to the 220-page framework based on feedback from readers. In Saskatchewan, Caroline Krentz<sup>7</sup> was the primary author of the province's 75-page program guide with contributions from early childhood educators, content experts, and field reviewers (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008).

### **A curriculum framework rather than a prescribed curriculum**

The meanings assigned to the terms "curriculum" and "curriculum framework" clarifies, as the New South Wales (NSW) Early Learning Framework states, how "a curriculum framework is not the same thing as a curriculum" (Office of Childcare, 2004, p. 20). According to Friendly, Doherty, and Beach (2006),

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<sup>7</sup> Caroline Krentz is a Professor Emerita, University of Regina.

curriculum is how programs are organized to support goals and philosophy. Drawing upon the New Zealand *Te Whariki* framework, the Saskatchewan document defines curriculum as “the whole array of experiences, planned and unplanned, that takes place in a young child’s learning environment” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 66). The NSW Early Learning Framework goes on to describe a framework: “[A] possible metaphor for a framework is that it is a sieve through which the professional ‘sifts’ thinking as a means of reflecting critically on practice,” or in other words, on the practice of curriculum (Office of Childcare, 2004, p. 20). The “thinking” that the NSW framework refers to is the vision, beliefs, values, and principles related to early learning and pedagogy. The OECD recommends that a curriculum framework should be flexible so that it can be adapted at the level of the individual program by well-trained and respected early childhood educators while still being consistent with the broad vision, beliefs, values and principles (Bennett, 2004, p.7). Ontario’s document articulates this flexibility: “*Early Learning for Every Child Today* complements, rather than replaces, specific curricular and pedagogical approaches, early identification protocols, and regulated requirements now in place in Ontario early childhood settings”. At the same time, the framework “provides direction for programs that do not have an explicit curriculum or consistent pedagogical approach” (Government of Ontario, p. 4). Whitty, one of the leads in the development of the New Brunswick framework, writes that a framework can serve to encourage early childhood educators “to shift from prescribed, preprogrammed curriculum to co-constructed curriculum” based on negotiated beliefs, values and principles related to early learning (Whitty, 2009, p. 50).



As thinking tools, the provincial curriculum frameworks are not theoretically neutral documents. Rather, each one adopts an implicit or explicit theoretical orientation. Australia's recent national early years learning framework, *Belonging, Being & Becoming* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 11) identifies the range and combination of theoretical orientations possible that shape explanations of adults' identities as educators and children's identities as learners in the provincial frameworks: "developmental theories that focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children's learning and development over time; socio-cultural theories that emphasize the central role that families and cultural groups play in children's learning and the importance of respectful relationships that provide insight into social and cultural contexts of learning and development; socio-behaviourist theories that focus on the role of experiences in shaping children's behaviour; critical theories that invite early childhood educators to challenge assumptions about curriculum and consider how their decisions may affect children differently; post-structural theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity, and social justice in early childhood settings".

In Ontario, the panel undertaking the development of a framework favoured "approaches that espoused developmental approaches" while recognizing the "specific needs of diverse groups including newcomers, refugees, special needs, additional language and Indigenous populations" (p. 5). The theoretical foundations of Quebec's educational program are explicitly stated as an "ecological approach" and "attachment theory". The British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick development teams were influenced by New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum, which takes a socio-cultural approach, and by Reggio Emilia's critical and post-structural image of the powerful,

competent child. Saskatchewan's Early Learning Program Guide (Government of Saskatchewan, 2002, p. 13) clearly states that it "offers a new perspective on how educators are evolving in their view of children". In addition, there were inter-provincial influences with British Columbia recognizing New Brunswick and Saskatchewan as contributors to their framework development. The Ontario and New Brunswick frameworks offer descriptions of the distinctions made by Bennett (2004) between pre-primary and social pedagogical approaches to early learning, with both aligned with the latter approach. This supports Dickinson's comment in an appendix to Ontario's document that "while Canada demonstrates aspects of the pre-primary tradition, this was balanced by relative freedom from province to province with regard to curriculum" (Dickinson, 2006, p.81). In discussing the design of a postfoundational (a term often used interchangeably with post-structural) curriculum document, Whitty (2009) describes how the development team work against the dominance of "developmentism" to create a document "that emphasizes a social-cultural approach to children's learning and care; one that recognizes children's and educator's interests, passions and strengths" (Whitty, 2009, p. 36).

### **Framework content**

The key purpose of a curriculum framework is, of course, for early childhood educators to use it on a daily basis. The frameworks (as well as their supporting

documents<sup>8</sup>) offer content that can be used in two key ways: (I) to stimulate discussion and dialogue among early childhood educators, family members, and allied professionals on their values, theories, and beliefs about early learning; (II) to offer early childhood educators the pedagogical tools for providing rich early learning experiences for young children which reflect a framework's vision and principles.

### *I. Discussions on values, theories and beliefs*

While most sections in the frameworks lend themselves to discussion, some are explicitly designed to provoke it. All frameworks offer a clear statement of values or principles that are open to “negotiation, critique and change” (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 6). Despite the different ways values or principles are expressed and/or weighted within a particular theoretical orientation, the frameworks taken together share common values and principles. For example, all frameworks focus on children as “competent learners” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 5) and “primary agents of their development” (Government of Quebec, 2007, p. 18), but the British Columbia, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick documents highlight the importance of an early childhood educator examining his/her image of the child as well as children's rights as “citizens to reach their fullest potential” (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 7). All frameworks also focus on: relationships with families “who have the most important role in promoting their children's well-being, learning and development in the context of supportive communities”

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<sup>8</sup> British Columbia: Understanding the British Columbia Early Learning Framework: From theory to practice; Saskatchewan: Assessment and Evaluation in Pre-K: A Planning guide for School Divisions and their Partners, Leading for Change, Creating Early Learning Environments; New Brunswick: Well-Being Professional Support Document.

(Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 15); “respect for diversity, equity and inclusion” (Government of Ontario, 2006 p. 6); and “open and flexible environments where playful exploration, problem-solving and creativity are encouraged and purposefully planned” (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 15). One Ontario framework principle stands out as different— “Knowledgeable, responsive early childhood professionals are essential” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p. 6)—certainly a principle unlikely to be disputed by others.

All frameworks reaffirm in their value statements the importance of play as central to childhood and early learning and as a source of great “pleasure” for children (Government of Quebec, 2007, p. 20). The Ontario framework draws upon the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario’s document on kindergarten to describe how “early childhood settings that value children’s play create a ‘climate of delight’ that honours childhood” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p. 15). The Saskatchewan document urges early childhood educators to reclaim their passion and delight in valuing children’s play (p. 20) while the New Brunswick document describes “dizzy play” and asks early childhood educators “to recognize and accept this kind of play valuing it for what it provides for the children; a release of physical energy, a sense of power, and often an expression of pure joy” (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 36).

## *II. Tools for practice*

Four tools of practice are evident in the frameworks: learning goals, reflection questions, educator-child interactions, and assessment and documentation of

learning. This content in the frameworks relates to two out of three broad sets of quality criteria for early childhood settings (Bennett, 2004): orientation quality which refers to the values and understandings of the educators, and interaction or procedural quality which refers to the quality of relationships and of the socio-pedagogical interactions between educators and children. With some curriculum frameworks the supporting documents provide more detailed explanations of the tools. For example, the document *Understanding the British Columbia Early Learning Framework: From Theory to Practice* describes the steps in pedagogical narration<sup>9</sup> using a particular “ordinary moment”, a water and sand play example.

### **Learning goals**

As Whitty (2009, p. 42) indicates, each development team made conscious and deliberate choices to describe their framework’s early learning goals in a particular way and to outline how these goals are linked to the provision of enriched learning experiences that support young children’s optimal well-being. Bennett (2004) has identified two broad types or choices of curricular emphasis: broad developmental goals and focused cognitive goals. The Ontario framework also notes how framework developers have to consider their choices: “the idea of including broad developmental domains and pathways to organize a curriculum framework has been questioned by some recent initiatives (for example, New Zealand’s innovative *Te Whariki* approach)” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p.

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<sup>9</sup> Pedagogical narration is the process of observing, recording and individually and collectively interpreting a series of related ordinary moments in practice. Similar tools are pedagogical documentation, and learning stories.

21). Each provincial framework then responded to this “questioning” in their particular articulation of learning goals.

The New Brunswick and British Columbia frameworks can be characterized as using “broad developmental goals”. The New Brunswick framework has four goals—well being; play and playfulness; communication and literacies; diversity and social responsibility—which Whitty states, “moved away from foregrounding developmental outcomes and deficit-based assessment to much broader-based learning goals and narrative assessment” (Whitty, 2009, p. 43). Aspects or facets of each goal are identified (e.g., a facet of well-being is physical health in which children explore body and movement). Sample narratives of children’s learning drawn from early childhood sites in which the New Brunswick framework was piloted illustrate each facet of a goal. Similarly, the British Columbia framework employs four broad areas of early learning based on its vision and principles: well-being and belonging; exploration and creativity; languages and literacies; and social responsibility and diversity. Key goals are identified in each area of learning; for example, to promote a sense of well being and belonging, adults provide a learning environment where young children can feel safe and respected, understand and follow routines, and adapt to and enjoy the experiences of change, surprise, and uncertainty.

The Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Ontario frameworks draw upon developmental theories to identify developmental domains and patterns of development, although certainly their choice of learning goals cannot be characterized as cognitively focused. The Saskatchewan *Play and Exploration* document briefly discusses areas of young children’s holistic development—social-emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and language and literacy—noting that the guide “assumes that early childhood educators have an

understanding of the developmental changes that typically occur in children during the preschool years” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 28). The framework further states that knowledge of this holistic development guides early childhood educators in providing “interesting and meaningful opportunities that support children in developing skills” (Ibid, p. 28). A central component of the Ontario framework is a Continuum of Development that reflects particular understandings about human development based on brain research and the science of early development (McCain & Mustard, 1999) rather than age-related expectations. The Continuum, which consists of domains, skills, and indicators of skills, assists early childhood educators in their observations and documentations of children’s emerging abilities and informs curriculum planning and implementation. The Quebec educational guide offers the most content on child development and outlines for information purposes in an appendix the acquisitions made by children in each area of their development, according to their age.

### **Reflection questions**

A second tool for practice offered by four of the frameworks, Quebec, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, is a series of questions, which require early childhood educators to reflect individually or collaboratively on their understandings of the learning goals or developmental skills. Some frameworks make a distinction between questions to consider for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children while others focus on preschoolers exclusively. For example, in the British Columbia framework, questions such as the following are posed to readers about preschool language, communication, and creative expression: How are children encouraged to use a wide variety of materials and

expressive mediums to represent and communicate their ideas (e.g. languages, music, drama, dance, art)? In the Saskatchewan document, educators are asked to engage in reflection, decision making, and evaluation through the following questions: “How do children in my program have the opportunity to experience social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development? What might I add to support holistic learning in my program? How will I know if my program demonstrates holistic learning?”

### **Educator-child interactions**

All curriculum frameworks highlight the importance of the educator’s role in building strong, responsive, and respectful relationships in which purposeful interactions with young children support optimal learning. Central to the Quebec document are the “solid attachment relationships that are formed between each child and adult in a child care setting (Government of Quebec, 2007, p. 15). This emphasis supports Bennett’s observation that early childhood educators are being “re-positioned” so that it is no longer sufficient for educators “to provide a secure and stimulating environment for young children who would then ensure their *own* development” (Bennett, 2004, p. 16). Rather, Bennett states that it is understood that “human development and learning is an exercise in co-construction, in which children, parents and educators have all a role to play” (Ibid). This shift in thinking about the roles of early childhood educators is nicely summarized in the British Columbia framework:

Adults’ responses to children’s activities—whether they respond, and the creativity of their responses—affect young children’s early learning capacities and their growing sense of themselves as members of their communities. Adults who are skilled at



supporting early learning and development are careful observers of children and encourage them to go beyond their current level of understanding or skill. (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p.10)

The New Brunswick framework offers “a supportive structure for educators as they co-construct curriculum with children, families and communities at the local level” (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 3) in the form of suggested provisions and practices (illustrated with photographs) related to aspects of the learning goals. These provisions and practices begin with educator behaviours such as “document”, “model”, “listen”, “respect”, “join in”, “invite”, and “ask questions”. The Saskatchewan document provides a separate section on the changing and evolving role of the educator (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 9) linked to a new understanding of the child as a competent learner. This educator is an observer, documenter, listener, researcher, creator of stimulating environment, co-constructor of knowledge, negotiator, supporter of children’s participation in decision-making, facilitator of small group learning, supporter of social relationships, partner with parents, and supporter of diversity. Throughout the Saskatchewan document, highlighted sections entitled “Quality in Action” identify what educators can do within their expanded roles to support and encourage optimal development. To expand educator practices, the Ontario framework provides descriptions of “interactions” which are examples of “adult-child communications, contacts and joint activity that support the child’s accomplishment of what he/she knows or does to show that a skill is emerging, being practiced or being elaborated” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p. 23).

### **Assessment and documentation of learning**

All frameworks (and in some cases, their supporting documents) provide educators with the tools “to assess and document children’s early learning in effective, innovative ways” (Government of British Columbia, 2009, p. 2). According to Bennett (2005, p.3), “approaches to curriculum strongly influence modes of assessment” described in a pedagogical or curriculum framework. Table 1 indicates that all five provincial frameworks favour a social-pedagogical and formative approach to assessment in which the processes of learning for each child “are set by negotiation (educator-parent-child) and informally evaluated unless screening is necessary” (Bennett, 2005, p. 8). Consistent with others, the Ontario framework describes the primary purpose of assessment: “to support curriculum planning based on where the child is at and what interests the child has...and to ensure that the child is benefiting from the early childhood setting” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p. 60). All frameworks ask educators to link “where the child is at” to a framework’s learning goals or developmental skills and to regard them as child strengths rather than deficits. The New Brunswick and British Columbia frameworks offer a more extensive focus on narratives and learning stories as valuable forms of pedagogical documentation.

**Table 1: Assessment processes described in provincial early learning curriculum frameworks and support documents**

<b>Province</b>	<b>Assessment processes related to curriculum</b>	<b>Support documents</b>
<b>British Columbia</b>	Pedagogical narration: Anecdotal observations Children’s work Photographs Audio or video tape recordings	Understanding the British Columbia Early Learning Framework: From theory to practice
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	Anecdotal records Checklists Learning stories Videotape recordings Photographs Portfolios Documentation posters, panels and books	Assessment and evaluation in pre-k: A planning guide for school divisions and their partners
<b>Ontario</b>	Based on continuum of learning: Observations Learning stories Portfolios of children’s creations and work Developmental screening tools (i.e., Nipissing District Developmental Screen)	
<b>New Brunswick</b>	Observations Recording children’s questions and theories and conversations Displaying and annotating children’s artwork Annotating photos of children in learning processes Learning story portfolios Albums of learning events Project webs Daily invitational family information boards Samples of children’s work	Well-Being professional support document
<b>Quebec</b>	Observations: anecdotal, charts, logs Work or photos of children carrying out activities they have planned	

## Recognizing diversity

Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2006, p. 14) have remarked that broadening and deepening cross-cultural understandings “is a very *Canadian* area of interest” since the mix of cultures, particularly in our cities, is a defining feature of Canada. The Quebec, British Columbia, Ontario and New Brunswick frameworks note this diversity in relation to provincial uniqueness. For example, one of the objectives of educational childcare services outlined in the Quebec document is to introduce young children “to values that [their] society cherishes: self-respect, respect for others and the environment, peaceful resolution of conflicts, equality between sexes and individuals, acceptance of differences, sharing and solidarity” (Government of Quebec, 2007, p. 6). A framework section is devoted to British Columbia’s “great geographic, social, cultural, linguistic and economic diversity” (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p.5). The section concludes with the following statement: “Children, with their boundless imagination and sense of adventure, along with the different ways of living and learning that are part of their individual, social and cultural heritages, will be the leaders and innovators who shape British Columbia in the future” (Ibid., p. 6). The New Brunswick framework<sup>10</sup> adopting the language of a post-structural orientation states:

The diversity of cultures in New Brunswick is rendered more complex by its socio-demographic diversity. With an almost equal split between rural and urban populations, a curriculum designed specifically for New Brunswick must embrace rural and urban

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<sup>10</sup> The Ontario framework refers readers to the document *Aménagement Linguistique*, a language planning policy for Ontario’s early childhood settings and Francophone communities. Saskatchewan’s program guide was translated into French in 2008.

lifeways by creating spaces for the inclusion of local knowledge, a sense of place and the discussion of differences. (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 9)

Frameworks from New Brunswick, Ontario, and British Columbia have a “focus on cultural identity that is so essential for Aboriginal children” (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 8). The British Columbia framework, in particular, emphasizes throughout the document the importance of cultural and linguistic revitalization and a First Nation’s cosmology and world view in all early learning contexts (Ibid., p. 29). There is recognition that the British Columbia’s early learning curriculum framework is a starting point for discussion, but Aboriginal communities may develop “their own culturally specific early learning framework” (Ibid., p. 2). One of the underlying principles in the New Brunswick, Ontario, and British Columbia frameworks specifically addresses diversity; for example, the Ontario framework states: “Demonstration of respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for optimal development and learning” (Government of Ontario, 2006, p. 11). Frameworks reference “culturally appropriate curriculum” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 18), the “additional languages” children have (Ibid, p. 32) and integrate examples of these in sections on questions to consider (British Columbia), provisions and practices (New Brunswick), quality in action (Saskatchewan), and adult-child interactions (Ontario). This analysis indicates that there is a consistent focus on cultural and linguistic diversity across four provincial frameworks and thus raises the question as to whether this emphasis is more reflective of provincial uniqueness or a pan-Canadian mosaic.

The provincial frameworks’ focus on children with special needs appears to be less integrative throughout the documents. Certainly, all the frameworks

recognize the specific needs of diverse groups including special needs. Reflecting its origins as an intervention framework for disadvantaged children, the Quebec guide (*Jouer, c'est magique!*) is more explicit about role of childcare services in detecting children with disabilities and in promoting “the quality of chances” for all children. The Ontario framework situates all children’s skills within the context of a developmental continuum rather than evaluates their performance against age-related expectations. The British Columbia framework (2008) states: “In putting forward an image of a capable child, full of potential, it is recognized that children differ in their strengths and capabilities, and that not all children have the same opportunities to develop their potential” (Government of British Columbia, 2008, p. 4).

However, this recognition of differences and the need for educators “to provide additional support as required to ensure each child’s right to full participation” (Government of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 5) is, in contrast to the focus on cultural and linguistic diversity, not always carried through to practice examples in the frameworks. Examples do not typically include naturalistic descriptions of children using specific materials such as “Braille, Sign Language, or pictographs” (evident in the New Brunswick document) to communicate to readers that the learning environment is designed for and includes all children. It is noteworthy that the New Brunswick (2008) document, which takes a postfoundational/post-structural theoretical orientation and states “in order to practice inclusivity, there is a call for a critical re-thinking of the language and practices of curricula” (Ibid, p. 190), successfully includes the multiple ways in which children can communicate and engage in reciprocal communication amongst peers.

## Implementation and evaluation

Outlining the content of the provincial early learning curriculum framework in the last section leads to the key questions for this section: Are early childhood educators in the provinces under discussion aware of the frameworks? Are they actually using them?

Analysis indicates that the five curriculum frameworks fall within several categories in relation to the scope of their implementations and evaluations. Implementation can be broadly characterized as province-wide or targeted, and professional training/development activities involved in the implementation described at a comprehensive or limited level. Informal or formal evaluations of implementation approaches have been conducted in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and New Brunswick, with a written report available from British Columbia.

In Quebec, framework implementation can be described as province-wide and professional development focused on the framework as limited. Every educator who owns a home daycare received a copy of the *Educational Program for Childcare Centres* and all directors of Quebec daycares attended a meeting and were introduced to the document<sup>11</sup> with the expectation that the directors would introduce it to their staff.<sup>12</sup> Ontario's implementation and evaluation led by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services involved seven targeted Best Start urban and rural demonstration sites that included a multi-service agency,

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication: France Deschênes, Coordonnatrice aux opérations, Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés, Direction des services à la famille Nord-Ouest.

<sup>12</sup> Quebec's early childhood educator professional association offers workshops on the Educational Program for Child Centre Centres.

Aboriginal and francophone sites<sup>13</sup>. An evaluation began with an assessment of staff training and their familiarity and use of *Early Learning for Every Child Today*. Evaluators conducted an on-site visit to assess adult-child interactions and the learning environment. One of the observations that emerged out of the Ontario evaluation is that educators can be situated at one of four levels of change leading to full implementation of the framework. At the first level, an educator has a basic knowledge of the curriculum framework and is followed by a second level in which an educator is able through self-assessment and observation to determine how well their practices are aligned with the vision and principles of the framework. To assist educators at the second level in going beyond a surface understanding of the document, workshops with materials that visually illustrate principles and practices are valuable. As well, reflective practice skills led to greater utilization of the framework although inconsistencies are still evident. At the third level, an educator utilizes the framework as a key resource for observations, intentional program planning, and documentation. Finally, at the fourth level, an educator fuses together principles and practices, and consistently uses the framework. Educators display greater confidence and are able to articulate and affirm what they know and believe. Implementation evaluators of the Ontario framework identified several factors that appear to be important in an educator reaching the fourth level: being part of a broader learning community which may involve schools, other community programs, and post-secondary ECE programs; active coaching by a mentor; regular staff meetings for

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication: Wanda St. Francois and Lois Saunders, Affiliated Services for Children and Youth, Hamilton Ontario led the evaluation of the implementation of Ontario's framework. While the framework was formally implemented and evaluated at seven demonstration sites, it has been used extensively in George Brown College's lab school programs.



discussing the framework; and staff training. Overall, evaluators found that sustainability of framework implementation was enhanced when the professional culture in a program promotes staff learning and change.

The targeted implementation of the Saskatchewan *Early Learning Program Guide* involved a first phase that introduced participants interested in the guide<sup>14</sup> to its vision and principles. In the second implementation phase, workshops on the value of play, holistic learning, observation and documentation were offered as well as opportunities for an ECE staff team to visit one of ten program sites that exemplified play and exploration practices. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education provided grant support to sites to develop tours and materials and to cover staff replacement costs. Informal feedback from participants has indicated that educators need time to make conceptual shifts in their understandings of the value of play and the role of educators and to put into practice these new understandings. Phase three is currently being developed in light of these results. In British Columbia, an implementation project<sup>15</sup> led by three faculty members from the University of Victoria, Northern Lights College, and Camosun College, consisted of a province-wide, and comprehensive three-strand, train-the-trainer approach: Strand One concentrated on developing trainers called field leaders, who delivered training about the framework and its implementation at the local level; Strand Two brought field leaders (from Strand One) together with ECE college instructors; and in Strand Three, the field leaders in collaboration with ECE college instructors delivered workshops to ECE practitioners throughout the province. British Columbia's professional development "focused on the processes

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication: Twyla Mensch and Laurie Hudyma, Senior Policy and Program Analysts, Early Childhood Education Unit, Early Learning and Child Care Branch, Ministry of Education.

<sup>15</sup> Information from June 2009, *The BC Early Learning Framework Implementation Project Report, March 2007 to March 2009*.

and skills involved in critical reflection and offered a tool, called pedagogical narrations, to give educators skills and techniques to deepen their understanding of the ordinary moments of children and to provide enriched learning opportunities” (Government of British Columbia, 2009, p. 7). Based on a review of participant feedback from Strands One and Three, British Columbia’s formal evaluation report indicates that the professional training and curriculum approach adopted by the implementation team and supported by the Ministry of Education led to a “successful introduction of the Early Learning Framework, its theory and practice, into the ECE community across the province” (Ibid. p. 37). Nevertheless, the report recommends that further work needs to be done to solidify and reinforce the ideas and tools to become part of daily practice (Ibid. p. 37). Other recommendations include: field leaders need to continue to deliver the Early Learning Framework Implementation workshops with substitution time support in order to organize and regionalize/localize the workshops; options need to be explored to create and maintain a database of exemplars that reflect the cultural diversity of young children and ECE practitioners, as well as the diversity of care arrangements in the province; and college instructors need to incorporate the framework and the tool of pedagogical narrations into their curriculum to ensure that new entrants to ECE are familiar with these provincial initiatives.

The New Brunswick curriculum framework project team created specific documents to support implementation province-wide and professional development at a comprehensive level. Over three implementation phases, a government-supported program of professional learning for all early childhood educators in the province and consisting of direct program support, institutes, training sessions, and consultation services, has been undertaken. A formal evaluation is planned but Whitty (2009), one of the curriculum developers comments that, “many educators find the broad-based goals more open and

relaxing and more related to the what and how of children's learning. Moreover, educators report that these goals inform and expand their own pedagogical practice" (Ibid. p. 44).

Bennett (2004) identifies three conditions for the successful implementation of a curriculum framework: (1) the presence of well-qualified, motivated staff who are trained to understand and implement the curriculum; (2) the requisite structural features such as adequate investment in buildings and outdoor environments; in human resources and staffing; varied learning materials; adequate ratios of qualified educators to children; and (3) appropriate monitoring and support systems to provide information and improve quality and accountability across the field, including in private provision. Based on the implementation of the provincial frameworks described above, it would be fair to say that they meet Bennett's conditions to a certain extent. The pre-service educational qualifications for early childhood educators range across the provinces from untrained to a minimum one- or two-year ECE diploma. Nevertheless, in New Brunswick, which has the least qualified ECEs, implementation of their early learning curriculum framework was most comprehensive whereas in Ontario, well-qualified ECEs received targeted to limited professional training. In some provinces, funding for in-service professional development activities and evaluations of them has ended, which will make it difficult to sustain staff commitment to put into practice a framework's vision and principles. Overall, it can be concluded that while early childhood educators across Canada may be aware of their provincial early learning curriculum frameworks, the extent to which they are using them is quite uncertain.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an introduction to recent provincial early learning curriculum frameworks, their dissemination and implementation to front-line early childhood educators and in some provinces, the evaluation of this implementation. An analysis of the content of the curriculum frameworks indicates that there is much to inspire and motivate early childhood educators to think about their philosophies of early learning and to provide rich learning environments for young children. Yet, we have only gained through evaluations limited insights into what the implementation of these curriculum frameworks means for broadening and deepening educators' understandings of children, child development, family involvement, early childhood educator roles and program quality. In Quebec, where there has been a mandated educational guide for all early childhood educators since 1997, several years later only "one-quarter of its childcare settings offered a level of quality that was considered good, very good or excellent" (Friendly & Prentice, 2009, p. 60). While this finding may be a "result of shifts in government policy, significant quality differences between for-profit and non-for-profit centres, and limited quality improvement activities" (Ibid), it signals to all provinces that Bennett's call for appropriate monitoring and support systems needs to be seriously addressed. As a result of their assessment of the quality of day care services in Quebec, Japel, Tremblay and Côté (2005, p. 32) concluded that a high quality educational program "can be successful only" if educators thoroughly understand and apply the principles underlying the program and articulated in an educational guide. Professional development seems particularly important when curriculum frameworks rely on tools of reflective and critical practice that are designed to challenge and shift

educator values, beliefs, and theories about teaching and learning. These frameworks require educators to be more than technicians who simply apply standardized technical skills prescribed by experts (Moss, 2006). Rather the curriculum frameworks require educators who are thinkers and interpreters of early childhood philosophies and principles, and who can thoughtfully and critically translate them into practice. These different understandings of early childhood educators may become more apparent and sharper when a framework is used as a guideline or as a regulation for practice. The New Brunswick framework, for example, is set to be codified in law (Bill 49) as the province's mandated early learning curriculum and may influence how the framework is interpreted and used by early childhood educators.

In several provinces the implementation of an early learning curriculum framework has come at a time when full-day kindergarten programs for 4- and 5-year-olds are being introduced. The continuities and differences between curriculum frameworks and guides that focus on children from birth to age four and those for kindergarten children need to be investigated. An analysis of provincial frameworks that offer a more comprehensive focus from birth to school age such as the Ontario framework could provide a better understanding of how a framework “can act as a unifying influence across services for different age groups” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008) and address the persistent divide between care and education. This chapter began with a vision of a national, universal and regulated ECEC system with a quality framework, but has described the increasing number of provinces with their own early learning curriculum framework. Moss (2007) comments that while uniformity is not necessary across the provinces and each curriculum framework can be interpreted locally, it is also desirable for provinces to work towards identifying

at a national level a body of agreed upon values, principles and objectives for early learning. In introducing an innovation—an early learning curriculum framework—the governments of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Quebec have opened up new directions in early childhood care and education in Canada. To sustain the promise of these directions much is required in supports, evaluations and analyses by governments in collaboration and consultation with those most effected, early childhood educators, children and families.

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