



Nova Scotia
Teachers Union

POSITION PAPER

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION
&
NOVA SCOTIA'S
PRE-PRIMARY PROGRAM**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine early childhood development and education and the current pre-primary model in Nova Scotia by: (1) providing a brief overview of pre-primary in the Nova Scotian context, (2) summarizing best practices as seen nationally and internationally, (3) analyzing the gaps between well supported best practices and the current model in Nova Scotia, and (4) concluding with the Nova Scotia Teachers Union's (NSTU) position on early childhood education and development.

NOVA SCOTIA PRE-PRIMARY PROGRAM IN CONTEXT

The Government of John Hamm proclaimed the *Pre-Primary Education Act* in March of 2006 outlining the authority of the Minister of Education and Governor in Council to supervise and manage the Act and to make regulations.¹ The Act, in its entirety, is less than 250 words and to date has no regulations accompanying it. The only information that can be garnered from this document is that the government of the day envisioned a need for pre-primary education for children under the age of six and believed it should fall under the broader jurisdiction of public education.

Under the Government of Darrell Dexter an internal government working group was formed in 2011 to investigate services for early years (prenatal to school-age). The *Early Years Project* had representation from the Departments of Education, Community Services, Health and Wellness, and the Office of Policy and Priorities. The NSTU participated in a focus group during this process. This project led to a shift in service delivery with the vision of an integrated approach to supporting children and families.

In 2013 the Government of Stephen McNeil expanded the Department of Education to include an Early Years Branch, creating the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This new Department was given the responsibility of supporting the learning, care and well-being of children through the prenatal period to age-six. The *Evaluation Framework Early Years Centres Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development* document lays out the government's foundation work on the Early Years Centres (EYC) and explains why and how the program would be evaluated.²

The 2013 report states, "Early Years Centres in Nova Scotia are following similar models as have been implemented in Toronto (Toronto First Duty) and New Brunswick (Early Childhood Development Centres)." Though the document states that they were following the lead from these two jurisdictions, the document fails to demonstrate the alignment of its program with these other two. The document sets out three core services that the EYC were to meet: play-based early learning programs for children in the year before entering school; family supports and resources; and regulated child care responsive to family needs. The report discusses the need to consult with stakeholders. There was a day-long workshop held to discuss the EYC program; however, the NSTU was not invited to be part of these discussions.

Phase 1 saw the introduction of EYC into four Nova Scotian schools, an assessment of which can be found in *Evaluation of the Early Years Centre Round 1 (2013 – 2015) Provincial Report*.³ Phase 2 saw an expansion of the program to add four more schools for a total of eight schools in the province, an assessment of which can be found in *Evaluation of the Nova Scotia Early Years Centres Year 2 Provincial Report February 2017*.⁴ These two reports were produced by an evaluation team from Dalhousie University, Research Power Incorporated, and Mount Saint Vincent University.

Sometime between the February 2017 report and the beginning of the 2017/2018 school year there was a shift from early years centres and early learning programs to pre-primary classes and pre-primary program.

The current Pre-Primary Fact Sheet gives a very brief overview of the Pre-Primary Program as it was rolled out in September 2017.⁵ This document states that the program will be offered during standard school hours, yet neglects to say that some programs will not encompass the full school day. The document also states that there is a world class early learning curriculum framework; however, it neglects to mention that the curriculum is still under development. It appears that the pre-primary program as offered in Nova Scotia is meant to be child care for children four years old by December 31 offered in public schools.

It is important to note that two of the schools from the two-year pilot had previous experience with running some form of early years programs. Rockingstone Heights School from Phase 1 had seven years experience with *Early Learning Opportunities*. Ecole Beau-Port from Phase 2 had eight years experience with *Grandir en Francais*. Fully one quarter of the pilot schools had experience running programs for this age group, which may tend to skew the baseline of the evaluations.

Other than anecdotal information, surveys, and administration/attendance records the evaluation methodology was based on three instruments: *Indicators of Change* (IOC), *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – 3* (ECERS-3), and *Early Development Instrument* (EDI). The IOC tool was developed by the Toronto First Duty project and adapted for Nova Scotia; it is used to measure progress towards integration of services.⁶ The ECERS-3 is widely accepted internationally as an instrument for assessing the overall quality of early childhood programs.⁷ The EDI was developed at the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University.⁸ The EDI assesses school readiness of students as they begin their first year of school and is widely accepted in Canada and internationally.

The Phase 2 report notes the following limitations: “The EYCs in the Phase 1 and Phase 2 sites are at different stages of implementation, with some sites developing, others transitioning and adapting and others experiencing challenges which can be both unique to sites and systemic in nature.” Outstanding challenges were reported which can be generalized to include: inconsistencies between sites, qualifications of staff, lack of integration with other services, barriers to access, lack of buy-in on play-based philosophy, and lack of data. The authors end their evaluation questioning the ability to demonstrate evidence on the effectiveness of the program using the EDI tool because of a lack of past-participation in the Early Learning Program by Grade Primary students.

QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION BENCHMARKS

It is critically important to ensure the pre-primary program, within the continuum of the Public School Program (PSP), be founded on developmentally appropriate philosophy, research, and teaching practices relevant to early years education. Quality should be measured against both national and international standards.

The Innocenti Research Centre of UNICEF produced a document in 2008 entitled *Benchmarks for Early Childhood Services in OECD* which outlines 15 benchmarks for evaluating quality of early childhood education and care programs.⁹ The 15 benchmarks are broken into four categories: social and family context, governance of early childhood systems, access to services, and program quality. Not surprisingly, several of the benchmarks speak to health services, child poverty, maternity/parental leave, and the need for appropriate policy and governance. The benchmarks for quality on accessibility state that at least 25% of children aged three and under should have access to public subsidies for child care and that there should be at least 80% of four-year-old children participating in publicly funded education. The benchmarks on program quality express the need for in-servicing of staff, the minimum of three-years of post-secondary education for staff in early education centres, and the alignment of staff qualification, working conditions and salaries amongst early childhood care providers, educators, and the social sector.

There is much discussion regarding the Ontario model of early childhood education as the Nova Scotian Government is holding it up as the system to emulate. The document *The Kindergarten Program* (2016) was produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education and outlines in great detail how the two-year kindergarten program in Ontario operates.¹⁰ The Ontario Ministry of Education developed full-day early childhood education for 4-year olds (Junior Kindergarten) and 5-year olds (Senior Kindergarten) as a component of their Public School Program over time; this was done in consultation with educational partners such as Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). ETFO's position paper *Full-Day Kindergarten Moving Ontario Forward* was published in 2008.¹¹ ETFO had a great deal of influence in shaping the current kindergarten system in Ontario.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's vision for its kindergarten program is as follows: "The Kindergarten program is a child-centred, developmentally appropriate, integrated program of learning for four-and five-year-old children. The purpose of the program is to establish a strong foundation for learning in the early years, and to do so in a safe and caring, play-based environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children." The fundamental components of the Ontario model include kindergarten (both junior and senior) as the beginning of formal early childhood education, as part of the PSP, with a full instructional-day, taught by certified teachers, with the aid of early childhood educators, within elementary schools, and founded on play-based learning. The similarity between Ontario's junior kindergarten program and Nova Scotia's pre-primary program begins and ends with the age group and the foundation of play-based development/learning.

IMPORTANCE OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

Research shows that age-appropriate, well-developed, play-based learning contributes to greater competencies in academic skills, social and emotional growth, and suitable behaviour. The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) recently wrote a *Statement on Play-Based Learning* saying it is supported by science, by experts, and by children and parents.¹² It reports: “There is now evidence that neural pathways in children’s brains are influenced and advanced in their development through exploration, thinking skills, problem solving, and language expression that occur during play.” The report quotes experts expounding on the virtues of play-based learning as the leading source of growth in terms of emotional, social, physical, language, and cognitive development. The statement concludes with: “When children are playing, children are learning.”

Guided play allows children to discover and experiment using interactive tools and practices, and helps develop academic, social, emotional, and behavioural skills. Wherever children are experimenting with their environment, acting out a role, manipulating shapes and objects, or creating, they are involved in learning through play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recently reported on *The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play* defining the teacher’s role in guided play, emphasizing the benefit to children’s development, and explaining the brain science behind it.¹³

The teacher’s role in guided play, as well as an interactive and experiential learning environment is fundamental to the child’s development and learning. Through observing, documenting, and analyzing the play, teachers are able to engage children to create, solve problems, and think critically. Furthermore, teachers’ involvement in play demonstrates to the children the importance of play and promotes a positive relationship between the teacher and students.

WHY THE PRE-PRIMARY PROGRAM SHOULD BE PART OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRAM

There are many advantages in having pre-primary classes run within elementary schools as part of the Public School Program. The resources, both physical and human, are well suited to enhance program delivery. Early integration into the school community creates a greater sense of belonging. Having pre-primary as part of the PSP ensures there is a continuum of scaffolded learning across the early years programming.

Elementary schools typically have the physical plant and geographical location well suited for high quality educational programs and accessibility. Elementary schools provide students and their teachers with access to resources such as gymnasiums, outdoor play structures and spaces, and libraries. Having pre-primary classes located within elementary schools generally allows for suitable indoor furnishings and age-appropriate infrastructure, as well as the possibility to share sound pedagogical material and resources with co-workers.

Having pre-primary as part of the PSP within schools permits greater access to program supports and educational specialists. The pre-primary program can be significantly enhanced if integrated into the PSP by allowing access to: specialist teachers (phys-ed and music), library resources, resource and learning centre teachers, and educational specialists such as school counsellors, speech language pathologists, and school psychologists. In conjunction with having qualified teachers delivering the program and having access to educational specialists there is a greater chance of early identification and intervention for children with special needs.

Having pre-primary students participate in school activities such as concerts, gardening and other environmental projects, winter carnival, science fair, heritage days, etc. will boost the students' sense of community and belonging. Mentoring activities such as "Reading Buddies" will benefit both younger and older students.

TEACHER QUALIFICATION

Two of UNICEF's 15 benchmarks for quality early childhood education and care programs in OECD countries address the qualifications of staff. Qualified teachers, holding a certificate to teach in Nova Scotia, should be employed in all school-based early childhood education programs (pre-primary). In Ontario, the jurisdiction being held up as a gold standard, the classroom is staffed by a certified teacher and an early childhood educator.

The main function of early years teachers is to develop young children's fundamental skills of academics, social awareness, emotional stability, and appropriate behaviour in preparation for elementary school. The teacher must develop these skills while responding to a range of individual developmental needs, learning styles, and economic and cultural diversity needs. Qualified teachers are best suited to support young children's growth starting at pre-primary progressing into their school life.

In Nova Scotia, teachers are required to complete a four-year university degree followed by a two-year education degree before they become qualified to teach. Through their education program, teachers gain expertise in curriculum delivery, assessment techniques, fostering positive learning environments, classroom management, and identification of learning and behavioural challenges. This pre-service education is essential for working within an elementary school. Qualified teachers are better educated to help facilitate the early diagnosis and treatment of physical, behavioural, and learning disabilities.

Increasingly the importance of educators having at least one university degree when working with young children is being recognized nationally and internationally. One of UNICEF's key benchmarks of quality for early childhood education and care is the requirement that at least 50 per cent of staff of early education centres are composed of professionals with a minimum of three-year post-secondary training. Internationally, including most European countries and many states in the USA, there are requirements to have a three or four-year university degree to work in this sector.

A recent US study examined the extent to which university-educated teachers had developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in their classrooms compared to early childhood educators with less than a bachelor's degree.¹⁴ In general, the study found that those with four years or more of college education, even if in an unrelated field, were stronger in their DAP than those with less education. The study concluded by saying: "Teachers of young children, first and foremost, need depth and breadth of education and experience, exposure to a world of ideas and perspectives, along with the skills to communicate and express their knowledge fluidly – the type of knowledge, skills, and stimulation acquired most handily through a 4-year degree program."

One of UNICEF's 15 benchmarks addresses participation in professional development, which enhances student achievement. Certified teachers contractually have greater access to professional development funds and in-service opportunities. There is a strong correlation between teachers' professional development and enhanced student achievement. UNICEF cites regular in-servicing as one of their key benchmarks for quality early childhood education and care.

CONCLUSION

The NSTU recognizes early childhood education as being inclusive of the time of school entry through early elementary including pre-primary education. More explicitly, pre-primary should be a component of a quality, equitable, universal, inclusive, and accessible public education system. Well-designed early childhood education programs enrich young children's lives and create a foundation for their growth and development throughout their education.

An effective early childhood education program should be appropriate developmentally in terms of:

- following well-developed play-based, discovery-based, experiential, and interactive curricula;
- meeting the children's needs academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviourally;
- responding to a range of individual developmental needs and learning styles; and
- responding to cultural diversity.

Provincial funding for early childhood education should be at appropriate levels to provide for:

- early diagnosis and treatment of physical, behavioural, and learning disabilities;
- program supports such as library, guidance, and other student services;
- adequate physical resources to ensure a safe and healthy learning and teaching environment; and
- appropriate staffing to accommodate all of the students' health and wellness requirements.

Finally, early childhood education programs require resources to allow for:

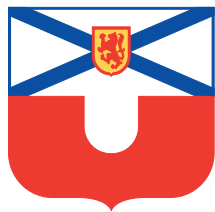
- delivery by a qualified teacher holding a certificate to teach in Nova Scotia; and
- appropriate support.

The NSTU policy on early childhood development outlines what both research and practice tell us should be the guiding principles of any early childhood education program. This position paper reiterates our beliefs about effective and appropriate early childhood education programs. It advocates for the best type of early years education for Nova Scotian children and it articulates the gap between what we believe is best and what is being provided by the pre-primary program.

We implore the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to re-examine the pre-primary program as implemented, and discuss with education partners, such as the NSTU, how to better ensure that what is being implemented truly meets the standard of world class early years programming. Our children and all Nova Scotians deserve and demand an education system that is modelled on the best.

Resources

1. Pre-primary Education Act, <http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/preprimy.htm>
2. Evaluation Framework Early Years Centres Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, www.nshrf.ca/sites/default/files/2014_11_26_eyc_evaluation_framework_report_final.pdf
3. Evaluation of the Early Years Centres Round 1 (2013 – 2015) Provincial Report, www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/2015earlyyearscentreevaluationen.pdf
4. Evaluation of the Nova Scotia Early Years Centres Year 2 Provincial Report February 2017, <https://www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/year2eycprovincialevaluationreport.pdf>
5. The Pre-Primary Fact Sheet, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, https://www.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/docs/fact_sheet_pre-primary_english.pdf
6. First Duty Indicators of Change, https://www1.toronto.ca/City%20of%20Toronto/Children's%20Services/Divisional%20Profile/Past%20Projects/firstduty/indicators_oct2005.pdf
7. Introduction to the Environment Rating Scales, <https://www.ersi.info/scales.html>
8. What is the Early development Instrument, <https://edi.offordcentre.com/about/what-is-the-edi/>
9. Bennett, John (2008). Benchmarks for Early Childhood Services in OECD Countries, Innocenti Research Centre UNICEF, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2008_02_final.pdf
10. The Kindergarten Program (2016), Ontario Ministry of Education, https://files.ontario.ca/books/edu_the_kindergarten_program_english_aoda_web_oct7.pdf
11. Full-Day Kindergarten Moving Ontario Forward, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, <http://www.etfo.ca/AboutETFO/Publications/PositionPapers/PositionPapersDocuments/Full-Day%20Kindergarten%20-%20Moving%20Ontario%20Forward.pdf>
12. Statement on Play-Based Learning, Council of Ministers of Education Canada, http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/282/play-based-learning_statement_EN.pdf
13. The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play: A Developing Story, The National Association for the Education of Young Children, <http://www.naeyc.org/yc/article/case-brain-science-guided-play>
14. Benson McMullen, Mary & Alat, Kazim. Education Matters in the Nurturing of the Beliefs of Preschool Caregivers and Teachers. Early Childhood Research and Practice. <http://www.peelearlyyears.com/pdf/Education%20Matters%20in%20the%20Nurturing%20of%20the%20Beliefs%20of%20Preschool%20Caregivers%20and%20Teachers.pdf>



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