

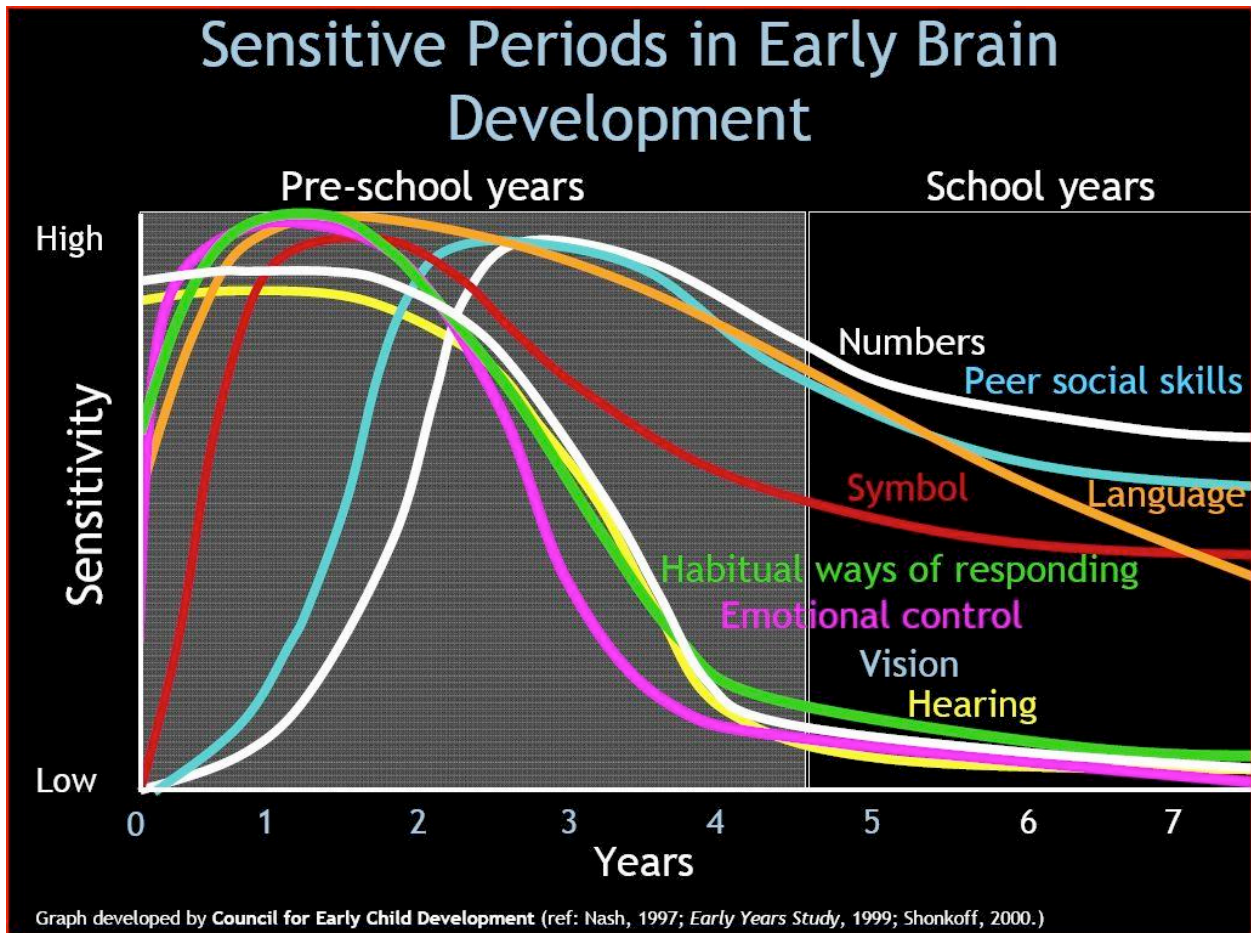
Policy

Early Human Development

Nova Scotia Teachers Union
May 2009

Early Childhood Development – a critical period

In 1997 the NSTU hosted a conference on child poverty. The keynote speaker was Dr. Fraser Mustard. He presented compelling evidence that the early environment plays a definitive role in all subsequent development. A little over a decade later the evidence is even stronger, but the systematic support for early human development remains haphazard and almost entirely at the discretion of individual parents and families. As a result, many of the children needing early intervention the most fail to receive it.

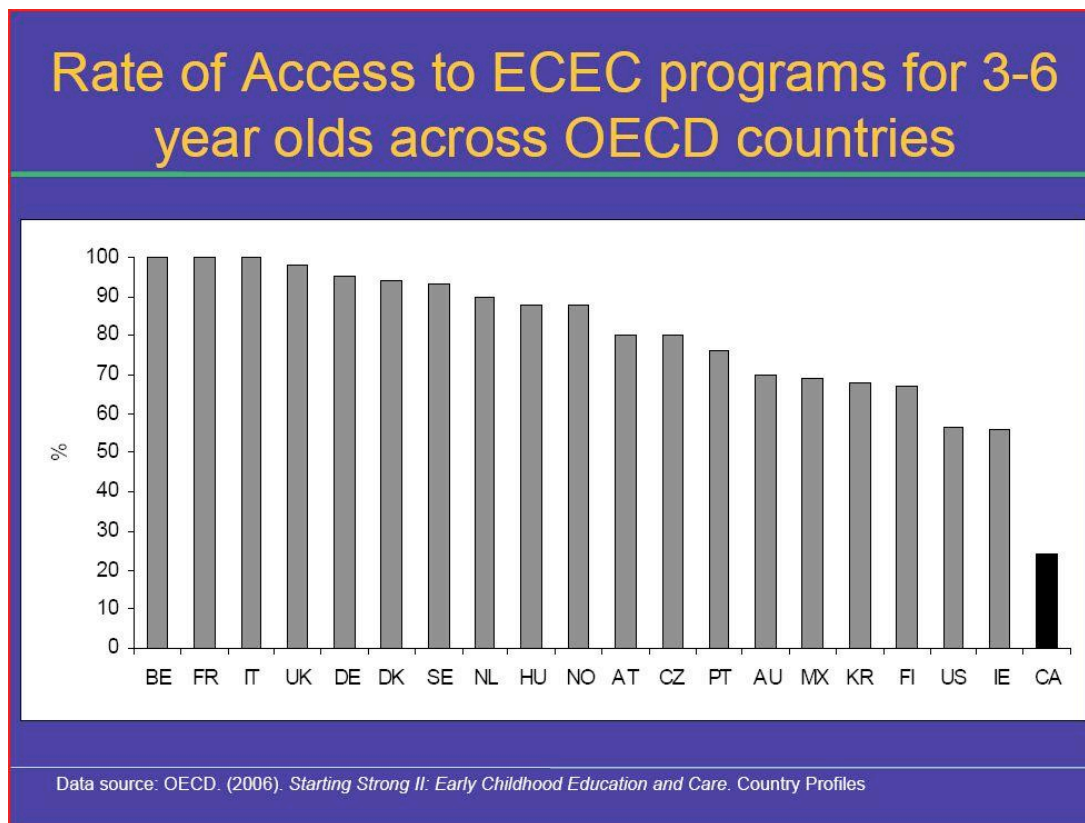


The graph above¹ shows the sensitivity to intervention success for eight² different components of learning. In all cases the impact of intervention prior to age four is much more significant than later interventions. Teachers in grades Primary and One can often identify students who will experience difficulty in school without needing to see diagnostic tests. Our efforts to enhance reading, writing, the understanding of number, social skills and appropriate emotional responses are much more difficult if children enter school without the appropriate early development.

¹ Hertzman, Clyde, President Council for Early Childhood Development, Presentation to Pan-Canadian Forum on Early Childhood Development, Montreal, January 29-30, 2009

² Although there are nine lines on the graph, only eight are identified developmental attributes

Although the evidence and research are conclusive, governments have failed to act. It is also clear there is no justification for the inaction we have seen in Canada! Canada ranks last among the developed countries in providing access to early childhood education³.



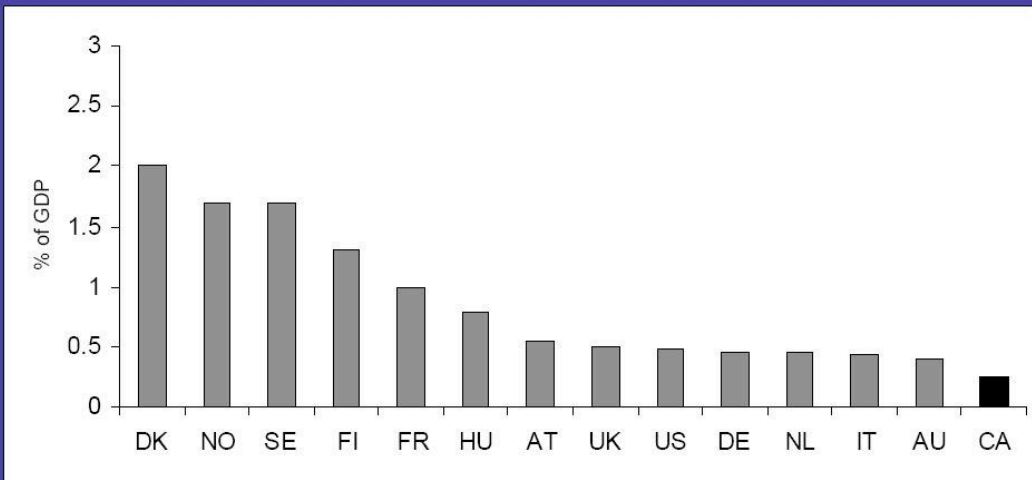
Not only is Canada last, but the access rate in Canada is less than half the access rate of Ireland, the country second from the bottom. Although access in Canada is certainly affected by our geography and sparse population density in many regions, it is the lack of political leadership that has produced such a dramatic result.

This interpretation of the data is supported by examining the resources allocated to early human development. Again, the OECD data⁴ show that Canada ranks last among the developed countries in the support for early development. Not even the United States with its focus on free market economics and low taxes spends as little on early development.

³ Beach, Jane, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada*, presentation at Pan-Canadian Summit on Early Childhood Education, January 29-30, 2009

⁴ Ibid

Canada's spending on ECEC programs



Data source: OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Annex C, pg. 246.

Recently⁵ educators and human development leaders across Canada came together to take the next steps in moving the country forward so that we support children in their most critical development at a level appropriate to one of the richest countries in the world.

The analysis of those countries that have made a substantial investment in the early years demonstrates a number of key features of successful programs. There are three critical components of any early development program.

First of all, the programs must be educational. But this does not mean they look like elementary classrooms. Rather, the educational program is constructed around problem-based play. Children develop best in rich, safe and supporting environments where they are stimulated to explore and solve the mysteries of the world around them. All the research emphasises that this play environment should not be structured in the same or even a similar manner as what is now in place for the Nova Scotia P-12 system. Specifically, the educational environment should not have a structured curriculum or a highly structured physical configuration.

The second aspect and critical principle of a successful early development program is that it must be equitable from the very outset.

The third component that follows from the imperative that any early development program be equitable is that it must be public. A non-public system requires parents to parcel out family resources and when those resources are scarce, many families simply cannot afford to see a larger picture. The day to day demands, out of necessity, take precedence over longer term plans

⁵ Pan-Canadian Summit on Early Childhood Development and Schools, Montreal, P.Q., January 29-30, 2009.

and concerns regardless of the validity and importance of those longer term factors. We also know that families increasingly rely on both parents working at one or more jobs each and this takes time away from interaction with children. Many children are already in bed when a parent arrives home from work.

We know there are many families providing rich, stimulating, nurturing and safe environments for children. Unfortunately, these families are not universal nor can they be assumed. While there is a correlation between such families and socio-economic status, families that do and those that do not provide the appropriate environment are found in all socio-economic segments. The public school system was created to ensure the delivery of education across the society. So too, a system of early human development must be a public system to ensure the delivery of these services throughout the society in a manner that is not linked to the parents' ability to pay or to their parenting skills.

Two corollaries flow from the previous three foundation aspects. The existing school infrastructure is the best vehicle to implement an early development program. In Nova Scotia we have an excess of space in many schools. In rural and urban communities alike, community schools face closure due to declining P-12 enrolment. Early development programs must be rooted in their communities and the existing school infrastructure is ideally suited to support such programs. Declining enrolments inherently generate the capacity to provide the physical infrastructure for early development programs.

It would be extraordinarily inefficient to create an early development and education structure in parallel with the existing regional school boards to deliver these programs. A number of school boards are already working toward the development of early development programs. However without a holistic, provincial approach, these programs cannot be implemented in a professional manner. School boards do not currently receive funding to pay for an early development program and it is an open question whether they have the mandate under the Education Act to do so. If they do they must either take resources from the P-12 schools within the board or have the ability to raise supplementary funds from another tax base. Not only does this contribute to provincial inequity, but it produces inequity within the board's constituents. Further, without provincial funding, boards do not have the financial resources to pay professional salaries to early development educators.

Therefore, the second corollary is that early development educators must be professional. Because early developmental education involves structures, organization, pedagogy and goals distinct from the P-12 outcome-based curriculum, the knowledge foundation is cannot be provided without a professional education on the part of those providing this environment. This means they must receive professional compensation, have professional working conditions and go through a professional certification process. As teachers we know that professional remuneration and professional working conditions go hand in hand with professional competence and learning.

Although the approach to early childhood learning and development is distinct from the elementary school program, education and development that focus on the child are continua and not disjointed approaches to learning. Although the grade Primary program is different from the approach taken in grade four, there is continuity. A stimulating and supportive environment is as important at age 60 as it is at age 1. It is the emphasis and the availability of other modes of learning that changes. Early development educators should have an understanding of both early

childhood pedagogy and elementary pedagogy with the emphasis on the former. This will facilitate not only their understanding of what follows the child's beginning educational journey, but also the professional options for these teachers as well.

The certification of early development educators belongs on the certification continuum of all educators. Those involved with the strategies for early child development should, first and foremost, have a solid understanding of early childhood development and the pedagogical approaches that stress problem-based play. It is also beneficial if they have a solid understanding of the social and educational structures into which children will be progressing. Similarly, educators in the early grades can only benefit from a strong understanding of early childhood development practice. In Nova Scotia we need universities that offer early childhood development programs to provide coordination between those programs and teacher education programs. Isolating these two areas of practice into silos fails to address the needs of pre-primary, primary and post-primary students and the needs of teachers of all children.

Teachers are keenly aware that children arrive in school with dramatic differences in readiness and opportunities. These differences far too often remain or even widen as children move through the school system. A critical element defining the inequity children will experience throughout their lives is the pre-school experience. Children spending their first few years in a rich, stimulating, safe, welcoming and loving environment are properly equipped to address the cognitive, emotional and social challenges of school and of later life. Children without this kind of early environment face additional discouraging challenges that may never be overcome.

It is clear there is a social responsibility to provide an appropriate early environment that meets these key criteria.

The NSTU believes early human development is an essential component of the social services that should be provided to all Nova Scotians and should be a viable part of a quality, universal, public education system.

Such services should have the following characteristics:

Early Human Development should be equitable.

Early Human Development should be public and therefore fully funded by the Department of Education and Department of Community Services.

Early Human Development services should strive to include as much as possible, the **time in a child's life from birth to** enrolment in grade Primary. Prenatal counselling for families should be available within the context of Early Human Development.

Early Human Development services should be voluntary.

Early Human Development services should be administered by and come under the jurisdiction of the regional school boards. School boards should seek to utilize existing infrastructure to provide community space for the delivery of early human development programs.

Early Human Development should be focused on problem-based play and should not be assessment-based or centred around a structured curriculum.

Early Human Development programs should be delivered by qualified professionals in early childhood development. Further, such professionals should be certified as teachers and **endorsed in a new category called “Early Human Development”**.

Nova Scotia universities should seek to integrate early childhood development programs and teacher education programs. Graduates from such an integrated program would be awarded, subject to the same procedures as other education graduates, **an Initial Teacher’s Certificate (Early Childhood Development)**.

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