



## Preschool programs

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## Synthesis on preschool programs

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### How important is it?

An increasing number of Canadian children are in some form of child care. In 2002–2003, 54% of Canadian children aged six months to five years were in some form of child care. Compare this to the statistic of 42% in 1994–1995 and it's clear that the numbers are on the rise<sup>1</sup>.

Also increasing is the proportion of families who opt for preschool programs, where [possible settings](#) include child-care centres, nursery schools, preschools, pre-kindergarten, child development centres, playgroups and Head Start. This can be attributed to the worldwide movement of mothers with young children into the workforce and the widespread knowledge of the value of good early childhood education, as evidenced by recent research on the development of the human brain and evaluative research on model early childhood programs.

[Preschool programs](#) provide care and education to children in the years before they enter school. They are structured programs with recurrent activities, the content of which is central to supporting and strengthening young children's learning and development. The curricula of these programs form the "front line" of children's experiences – what is taught and what is learned.

### What do we know?

High-quality early care and education have been associated with both short- and long-term cognitive, social and emotional [benefits](#) for young children's development.

Publicly funded preschool programs, such as Head Start, have been shown to affect different aspects of children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Results of short-term preschool studies (e.g. Head Start Impact Study and Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey) have found growth in children in areas such as literacy skills, vocabulary, early writing skills, social skills, and reduced behaviour problems. Benefits for families include access to health care and, reduced use of physical discipline.

[Evaluative program studies](#) (e.g. High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, Carolina Abecedarian Study, Chicago Longitudinal Study) have found a variety of important positive long-lasting effects on participants, including intellectual abilities, school achievement and commitment, high school graduation, college attendance and grade retention. Adult earning levels, as well as employment rates, special services placement, teen parenthood and juvenile arrests, have also registered long-term improvements. These studies also have demonstrated substantial economic return on investment – up to \$17.07 per dollar invested.

[Curriculum](#) (the content of what is taught and what is learned), which has been studied empirically, is a critical component of preschool programs. Theories of child development have served as the principal foundation for curriculum model development. Variations among curriculum models reflect differences in values concerning what is more or less important for young children to learn, as well as differences in the process by which children are believed to learn and develop. These variations inform the role of teachers, the curriculum's focus, the classroom structure and ways in which children participate in learning.

Early childhood curriculum models also vary in terms of the freedom granted to teachers to interpret how the model's framework is implemented. Some curriculum models are highly structured and provide detailed scripts for teacher behaviours. Others emphasize guiding principles and expect teachers to determine how best to implement these principles. Curriculum models, regardless of their goals and the degree of flexibility in their implementation, are designed to promote uniformity across early childhood programs through the use of a prepared curriculum, consistent instructional techniques and predictable child outcomes.

Each curriculum model has significantly different effects on children. [Child results](#) are contingent not only on the curriculum, but also on children's temperament, family background, social class, cultural traditions and the qualifications and qualities of the classroom teacher.

### **What can be done?**

[Two dimensions](#) typically measured when quality is discussed are process variables (e.g. the nature of children's interactions with adult caregivers) and structural variables (e.g. adult-child ratios, group size and teacher training and knowledge). Heightened awareness of early development has turned the attention of policy-makers and practitioners to the content or curriculum of preschool programs.

So far, no particular curriculum model has been proven to be more effective than any other; however, scholars and major national organizations have identified the following [key aspects](#) of an effective curriculum model:

- Children are cognitively, physically, socially and artistically active and engaged.
- Curriculum goals are clearly defined, shared and understood by all adults who have a stake in children's learning.
- Teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children.
- The curriculum is based on evidence that is developmentally, culturally and linguistically relevant for the children who will experience the curriculum.
- The curriculum builds on children's prior learning and experiences.
- The curriculum should cover all areas of development, including children's physical health, well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.
- The curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.

Children's needs vary greatly, making it impractical to identify one ideal curriculum model. Nonetheless, curriculum is central not only to the knowledge and skills children gain, but also to the application of particular pedagogical approaches and the nature of teacher/caregiver-child interactions.

Instead, research is needed to determine the conditions under which certain curricula work best for certain children. Starting Strong II, the second report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), summarizes the findings of a comparative review of early childhood education and care programs and policies in 20 countries (including Canada) between 1998 and 2005. It makes two [recommendations](#): 1) that we place well-being, early development and learning at the centre of early childhood education, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies; 2) that we develop with stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all early childhood education services.

Even though [prevailing approaches](#) in the U.S. and Canada may be different at some levels, the critical element that runs across all discussions of effective preschool programs is the need for a skilled, reflective and responsive early childhood workforce to establish preschool programs as early learning environments.

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## Preschool Programs

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### **Topic**

*Preschool programs*

### **Introduction and Subject**

Preschool programs are purposeful arrangements of recurrent activities that provide care and education to children in the years before they enter school. While “preschool” logically encompasses the entire period from birth to school entry, it sometimes refers specifically to the year or two before school entry, which is kindergarten entry for five-year-olds in many places.

While families continue to rear young children from birth to five years old in their homes as they always have, an increasing proportion of families arrange for some care and education of young children by non-relatives; that is to say, they enrol their children in preschool programs. A nationally representative U.S. survey (2001) of the care and education of young children under six who were not yet in kindergarten<sup>1</sup> found that:

- 40% of these children had no additional arrangements, receiving care and education exclusively from their parents;
- 22% received care and education from non-parental relatives in homes, 70% of them being grandparents;<sup>2</sup>
- 16% received care and education from non-relatives in homes, settings known formally as family or group daycare homes;
- 33% received care and education from non-relatives in centres. Centre care and education increased substantially and steadily with age, from 8% for infants under one to 16% for one-year-olds, 25% for two-year-olds, 43% for three-year-olds, and 65% for four-year-olds.

### **Problems and Research Context**

Preschool programs have become more widespread since the middle of the 20th century for two reasons. One is the worldwide movement of mothers of young children into the work force. The other is widespread knowledge of the accumulating evidence of the value of good early childhood education from recent research on the development of the human brain and evaluative research on model early childhood programs. Neuroscience research has found that the brains of young children raised in high-toxic-stress settings are visibly less developed than the brains of young children raised in low-toxic-stress settings and that children’s brains are much more active from ages three to seven than in subsequent years.<sup>3</sup>

### Recent Research Results

Evaluative program research has found a variety of important effects of model preschool programs on participants from early childhood even into adulthood.<sup>4</sup> These studies have combined rigorous design, long-term study, and low rates of missing data to arrive at evidence that high-quality early childhood program experience has important positive long-lasting effects on participants that result in substantial economic return on investment.

- The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study randomly assigned 123 poor children to participate in a high-quality preschool program at ages three and four or to no preschool program and followed these study participants through age 40. The study found that this high-quality preschool program had strong positive effects on participants' intellectual abilities, school achievement and commitment, high school graduation, adult earnings and employment, and avoidance of criminal activity.<sup>5</sup> Economic analysis found that, in constant 2000 dollars discounted at 3%, the economic return to society for the program was \$258,888 per participant on an investment of \$15,166 per participant – \$17.07 per dollar invested.
- The Carolina Abecedarian study randomly assigned 111 infants from poor families averaging 4.4 months of age to a special program group or a typical child-care group that used the prevalent child-care arrangements in homes and centres.<sup>6</sup> It found that such a high-quality child-care program for children from infancy to school entry improved participants' intellectual performance and school achievement. Fewer program participants repeated a grade or required special services or became teen parents; and more of them graduated from high school and more attended a four-year college. Economic analysis found that, in 2000 dollars discounted at 3% annually (converted from the 2002 dollars reported), the program cost \$34,476 per participant and yielded benefits to society of \$130,300 per participant – a return of \$3.78 per dollar invested.<sup>7</sup>
- The Chicago Longitudinal Study compared 989 low-income children who attended the city school district's Child-Parent Centres to a comparison group of 550 of their classmates who did not attend these centres.<sup>8</sup> The centres provided a part-day preschool program for three- and four-year-olds. The preschool-program group surpassed the no-preschool-program group in educational performance and social behaviour, with lower rates of grade retention and special education placement and a lower rate of juvenile arrests, followed by a higher rate of high school completion. Economic analysis found that, in 2000 dollars discounted at 3% annually (converted from the 1998 dollars reported), the program cost \$6,956 per participant and yielded benefits of \$49,564 per participant – a return of \$7.10 per dollar invested.<sup>9</sup>

In the past few years, a new generation of rigorous short-term preschool studies, most randomly assigning children to the program or no-program conditions, has produced relatively disappointing results. These studies have looked at the effects of publicly funded preschool programs, either typical Head Start programs or special Head Start and

other federally funded early childhood programs.

Two studies of typical Head Start programs are now underway. The Head Start Impact Study involves a nationally representative sample of Head Start programs and random assignment of children to Head Start or no Head Start. This study has so far provided results for entering three-year-olds and entering four-year-olds after one year in Head Start and will follow some children through first grade.<sup>10</sup> In its first report, the study found evidence of small to moderate Head Start effects on children's literacy skills, reduced problem behaviours of three-year-olds, children's access to health care, parents' reading to their children, and reduced use of physical discipline of three-year-olds. The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey<sup>11</sup> is a study of a representative national sample of Head Start programs in the U.S. Relative to national norms, children made significant gains during their Head Start year, particularly in vocabulary and early writing skills. Children in Head Start grew in social skills and reduced hyperactive behaviour. Head Start graduates showed further progress toward national averages during kindergarten.

Rigorous evaluations of several special Head Start and similar programs have found small program effects, examining the effects of the Early Head Start program,<sup>12</sup> the Head Start Comprehensive Child Development Program,<sup>13</sup> and the U.S. Department of Education's Even Start Family Literacy program.<sup>14</sup> A study of the effects of five state-funded preschool programs, using a regression discontinuity design, found statistically significant, meaningful effects on children's vocabulary, print awareness skills and early mathematics skills.<sup>15</sup>

Curriculum is a critical component of preschool programs that has been studied empirically. Several preschool curriculum comparison studies that began in the 1960s have followed preschool participants for years afterwards. One study found that young people born in poverty experienced fewer emotional problems and felony arrests if they attended a preschool program that used the child development-focused High/Scope model or a traditional child-centered Nursery School model, rather than a teacher-centered Direct Instruction model.<sup>16</sup> This study and two other longitudinal studies found that children in Direct Instruction programs significantly outperformed children in traditional and other programs on various measures of intellectual performance during the program and for up to a year afterwards, but then these gains faded out.<sup>17,18</sup> In one of these studies, however, the high school graduation rates were strikingly if not significantly different – 70% for the traditional program group, 48% for the Direct Instruction group and 47% for the no-program group. Evidence continues to accumulate that early childhood curriculum models differ significantly in some of their effects on children.<sup>19,20</sup>

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The evidence is clear that early childhood experiences can greatly influence people's lives, and model preschool programs can evoke such early childhood experiences. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is also possible to intervene in young children's lives in ways that do not tap this great reservoir of potential. Effective preschool programs need qualified preschool teachers who know how to contribute to children's

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cognitive and social development and do so. These teachers must reach out to parents and make them full partners in educating their young children. Many young children now attend preschool programs. Ensuring that all these programs have qualified teachers who know how to contribute to young children's development and motivate parents to do the same will contribute greatly to the success and achievements of the next generation.

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## Preschool Programs: Effective Curricula

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### **Topic**

*Preschool programs*

### **Introduction**

High quality early care and education has been associated with both short-term and long-term cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for young children's development. When quality is discussed, it is typically measured by two dimensions: (1) *process* variables (e.g., the nature of children's interactions with adult caregivers) and (2) *structural* variables (e.g., the characteristics that can be regulated by policy and that create beneficial conditions for children's development, including adult:child ratios, group size, and teacher training).<sup>1,2</sup> In discussions of quality, curriculum – or the content of what is taught to children – has not been the focal point until recently.

### **Subject**

Throughout the evolution of early childhood education, curriculum has been entangled, and often confused, with important and related issues (i.e., beliefs, learning theories/pedagogies, and skills/standards). Curriculum is different from, but reflects, guiding principles or beliefs about children and their learning. Three beliefs prevail in the field today: (a) children are competent and eager learners whose natural curiosity yields rich learning trajectories; (b) children learn in an integrated way, so that specific subject area learnings (e.g., math, science, language) best take place within the context of child-generated experiences (e.g., cooking, gardening, constructing); and (c) children need exposure to all domains of development – physical and motor, language, cognitive, social and emotional – so no single domain takes precedence over any other.<sup>3,4</sup>

Curriculum is also different from, but closely linked to, learning theories and pedagogies. Behaviourist theories of child development led to highly didactic models of direct instruction in which teachers typically present discrete facts to the entire class of children in whole groups. Maturationist theories of child development, where children are allowed to develop at their own pace, advanced pedagogy and curricula that enable children to direct their own learning. Constructivist theories of child development advanced pedagogy wherein children are active partners with their socio-cultural environment, including teachers and peers.

Finally, curriculum is different from, but supportive of, children's skills and behaviours. Curriculum is intended to encourage learning processes (e.g., attention, observation, memory), cognitive skills (e.g., reasoning, comparing and contrasting, classification), and the acquisition of specific information (e.g., the names of numbers and letters of the alphabet). In this sense, curriculum is sometimes confused with standards or expectations of what children should know and do.

Curriculum, then, must be clearly understood for what it is and for what it uniquely contributes to early care and education. Curriculum is the content of what is taught and what is learned.

### **Problems**

There are three central problems to understanding the effectiveness of curricula in early childhood programs. First, there is a persistent lack of clarity about the distinctions between curriculum and pedagogy. Second, there is no clear evidence of the comparative effectiveness of specific curricula; past efforts to compare curricular models have not identified one as clearly superior to others. Third, it is difficult to evaluate a curriculum's effectiveness given its interaction with other social and educational factors. Child results are contingent not only on the curriculum, but also on children's temperament, family background, social class, cultural traditions, and the qualifications and qualities of the classroom teacher.<sup>3,5</sup>

### **Research Context**

Amidst the current quest to achieve better outcomes for young children, there is growing momentum to shift from a focus on all the domains of development to those that promote a greater emphasis on literacy, language, and numeracy. Early educators report feeling pressure to stress academic curricular areas from kindergarten teachers who, in turn, report pressure from primary teachers to concentrate on a more limited range of subject areas.<sup>6</sup> Such a shift in focus is manifest formally in new guidelines directing programs to focus more heavily in these areas.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key Research Questions**

The search for effective curricula persists, with the federal government in the United States currently funding randomized clinical trials to compare various curriculum models to determine whether one or more curricula produce educationally meaningful effects for children's language skills, pre-reading and pre-math abilities, cognition, general knowledge, and social competence at the end of preschool and through the end of first grade.

### **Recent Research Results**

While data have not yet deemed any particular curricular model to be more effective than others, scholars and major national organizations in the field have recommended indicators of effectiveness that entwine curriculum and pedagogy including the following:<sup>3,5,8-10</sup>

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- *Children are active and engaged.* Children learn best by exploring and thinking about all sorts of phenomena. As such, children need to be active in their learning, not just cognitively, but also physically, socially, and artistically. Effective curriculum ensures that important concepts are taught through projects, every day experiences, collaborative activities, and an active curriculum.
- *Goals are clear and shared by all.* Curriculum goals should be clearly defined, shared, and understood by all adults who have a stake in children's learning (e.g., families, teachers, program administrators). The curriculum and related teaching strategies should be designed to help achieve goals in a unified, coherent way.
- *Teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children.* As already noted, curriculum and the content of what young children need to learn, know, and be able to do is closely linked with pedagogy and how such content is delivered. As a consequence, curriculum implementation relies primarily on teachers and the nature of teacher/child interactions. Teachers' engagement with children also allows them to regularly assess each child's progress and make adjustments in the classroom as necessary. Effective pedagogical and assessment strategies rely to a large extent on teachers' experience levels and educational backgrounds. To support effective teaching, curriculum should be linked to on-going professional development for teachers.
- *Curriculum is evidence-based.* The curriculum should be based on evidence that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically relevant for the children who will experience the curriculum. It should be organized around principles of child development and learning. When subject-specific curricula are adopted, they should also meet the standards of relevant professional organizations (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of English or the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics).
- *Curriculum builds on children's prior learning and experiences.* The content and implementation of the curriculum should build on children's prior individual, age-related, and cultural learning and be inclusive of children with disabilities. In addition, curriculum should support the knowledge that children gain from their families and communities and support children whose home language is not English in building a solid base for later learning. Effective curricula offer guidance, adaptations, and specific strategies to differentiate teaching and classroom activities according to the characteristics and backgrounds of the children.
- *Curriculum is comprehensive.* In spite of pressures to emphasize language, literacy, and mathematics, the curriculum should encompass all areas of development including children's physical health; well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development, and cognition and general knowledge. Rather than adopting a didactic, school-based approach in which each subject is taught distinctly and at separate times, curricula in early care and education should explicitly integrate learning across domains.

- *Curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.* Increasingly, policy-makers and practitioners alike are concerned with improving children's learning experiences. This concern is manifest in the increased attention to a systemic and systematic approach to accountability that sets specific learning outcomes (i.e., early learning standards), guidance on what content to deliver to young children (i.e., curriculum), and assessment procedures that document children's progress. However, attending to each independently is insufficient; effective curriculum is well aligned with standards and assessments.

### **Conclusions**

Curriculum, or the content of what children learn, is central to supporting and strengthening young children's learning and development because it is the "front line" of children's experiences. Curriculum is different from beliefs about children, pedagogy, learning standards, and children's skills. Nonetheless, curriculum is central not only to the knowledge and skills children gain, but also to the application of particular pedagogical approaches and to the nature of teacher/caregiver-child interactions. With increasing numbers of children in early care and education programs, coupled with the increasing focus on school readiness, effective curriculum is crucial. Moreover, as the press for accountability increases, children must be exposed to the content for which they and their teachers will be held accountable.

### **Implications**

Given the diversity of young children in early care and education programs, it is unlikely that the field will or should come to consensus on the superiority of a single curricular model. Effective curricula rely on a balance between a clearly defined structure that impacts all children and flexibility that allows for individualization for children, families, and classrooms. Curriculum research must, therefore, discern the conditions under which certain curricula work best for certain children. Specifically, next generation research must examine which approaches produce educationally meaningful effects in which domains of development, for which children, under what social conditions, and with what kinds of professional preparation for teachers. Beyond, but embracing the research agenda, it is also crucial that curricula be understood as conceptually distinct from pedagogy despite their inextricable linkages in practice.

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## Preschool Programs: Effective Curriculum. Comments on Kagan and Kauerz and on Schweinhart

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### **Topic**

*Preschool programs*

### **Introduction**

Canadian preschool programs provide organized environments to children prior to entry in the school system at age five years. Possible settings include child care centres, nursery schools, preschools, prekindergarten, junior kindergarten, child development centres, play groups and Aboriginal Head Start.<sup>1</sup> Researchers agree that the combination of staff education, child-staff ratios and group size are structural elements that have an impact on the quality of preschool programs and on child development outcomes. Important process or dynamic elements highlight children's interactions with adults as key elements of quality that impact on child development outcomes.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The structure of programs - how many staff with what professional education with how many children - influences the quality of the daily interactions with children. Heightened awareness about early development, particularly early brain development in setting the foundation for life long learning, behaviour and health<sup>5</sup> coupled with concerns about children's social, emotional and intellectual developmental difficulties at school entry<sup>6</sup>, have turned the attention of policy-makers and practitioners to the content of preschool programs.

Several jurisdictions in Canada are developing, or have developed, curriculum frameworks for preschool programs. Ontario's *Best Start Early Learning Framework*<sup>7</sup> and the *New Brunswick Curriculum Frameworks for Early Learning and Child*<sup>8</sup> both set out a guide for curriculum and pedagogy, recognizing the diverse array of approaches now used in early childhood settings. Quebec has a province-wide curriculum, *Joie, c'est magique*, that is used in its regulated child care settings.<sup>9</sup>

The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Policy was launched in 1998 by the Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD). The review examined early childhood education and care programs and policies in 20 countries (including Canada) between 1998 and 2005. The second OECD comparative report, *Starting Strong II*<sup>10,11</sup> summarizes the findings of the reviews and makes two recommendations that are relevant to a discussion on curriculum and pedagogy in preschool programs:

- *To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies.*
- *To develop with stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services.*<sup>12</sup>

Lawrence Schweinhart of the High/Scope Education Research Foundation has been a lead researcher of the Perry Preschool Program Study since the 1970's. The goal of the Perry Preschool Program was to improve the development and learning of young children living in disadvantaged circumstances. The study was a randomized control trial of 123 children that has followed the participants through age 40. Schweinhart and his colleagues found stunning results and return on investment - \$17.05 per dollar invested. The cognitively-oriented program developed for the Perry Preschool Program Study has grown into a large curriculum resource organization that supports curriculum development in programs in the United States and internationally, including Canada.

Schweinhart<sup>13</sup> points to the role of curriculum and its implementation as a critical element in the kinds of results that were found in the Perry Preschool Program Study and in two other model preschool programs: the Carolina Abecedarian study<sup>14</sup> and the Chicago Longitudinal Study of Child-Parent Centres.<sup>15</sup> All three programs were carefully monitored as part of the ongoing research initiative. They employed qualified early childhood staff, had extensive parent involvement components, and guided the implementation of well thought out, but different, curricula approaches.<sup>16</sup>

Sharon Kagan is a leader in measuring children's achievements. She is a strong advocate in the need to link early learning standards, curriculum and assessment to better prepare children for the transition to school.<sup>17</sup> Kagan defines early learning standards as what children should know and are able to do across the five developmental domains (physical and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language and literacy; cognition and general knowledge) that are used by the National Educational Goals Panel.

Kagan and Kauerz. correctly point out the confusion between curriculum and pedagogy but do not provide clear definitions or distinguish between the two concepts. Instead they recommend indicators of effectiveness that "entwine curriculum and pedagogy",<sup>18</sup> including that curriculum is aligned with learning standards and appropriate assessments.

### **Research and Conclusions**

Two predominant approaches emerge in cross-country comparisons of curriculum: social pedagogy and pre-primary.<sup>11,19,20</sup> Social pedagogic practices, common in Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, and Italy, include a broad developmental framework and local curriculum development. Curriculum decisions are driven by the interests of the children within the context of their families and immediate communities. The focus is on developmental goals, interactivity with educators and peers, and a high quality of life in the early childhood setting. The curriculum has broad orientations for children rather than prescribed outcomes. Goals may become less clear and there is less accountability in achieving these goals and little emphasis on assessment of children's mastery of skills.

Broad goals are established for each child in consultation with parents and are informally evaluated through on-going observation and documentation unless further screening seems advisable. The acquisition of developmental skills is perceived as a by-product rather than as the driver of the curriculum.

Pre-primary practices are common in France, United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. They are characterized by centralized development of the curriculum, often with detailed goals and outcomes that determine or influence curriculum decisions about what and how children learn. The goals and outcomes are often stated as learning standards or learning expectations and are related to school readiness tasks and skills, that in turn are related to literacy and numeracy in preparation for entry into Grade One.<sup>21</sup> Educators tend to interact with children around activities related to the identified learning expectations and rely more on direct instruction strategies. Specific learning expectations may be set at a national or regional level. The assessment of children's achievements in meeting the learning expectations is usually required. Sometimes referred to as the 'schoolification' of the early years<sup>11</sup>, this approach is in contrast to other jurisdictions that are developing curriculum based on ideas and values about childhood and the purpose of preschool programs.<sup>21,22</sup>

In practice, most jurisdictions use approaches that blend elements of both, but lean towards either a pre-primary approach or a social pedagogic approach. Canada has a balance of both approaches among its early learning and child care programs, as well as many programs that do not have a clear approach at all.<sup>21,23,24</sup> As Kagan and Kauerz, and Schwiens point out, a substantial and growing research base 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.<sup>25</sup> But there is less agreement on what the approach should be.

### **Implications for Services, Development and Policy**

Kagan and Kauerz and Schwiens point to the value of having a curriculum approach and direction in preschool programs that prepares children for success in their school years. They recommend a holistic, developmental approach, skilled early childhood practitioners, clear and specific program and early learning standards. Their approaches are consistent with pre-primary approaches prevalent in the United States.

A Canadian review of the pedagogy of play suggests another approach that is similar to socio-pedagogic practices.<sup>26</sup> Children are viewed as independent agents who can have an active role in shaping their learning environments. The focus is on enriching and extending learning opportunities that emerge, based on the early childhood practitioner's knowledge of child development, observation and documentation of the child's activities, and the child's family and community context.

The critical element that runs across all discussions of effective preschool programs is a skilled early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators who are reflective and

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responsive practitioners are essential in establishing preschool programs as early learning environments.

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