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Families' experiences in Pre-Primary schooling in Nova Scotia and the implications for policy and practice

Jessie-Lee McIsaac, PhD, Christine McLean, PhD

Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia, Canada

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Introduction

Across Canada, changes are underway as part of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements to make child care more accessible for families. Reforms, however, continue to accommodate child care as a private commodity where owners or operators consider its viability based on individual business plans.[1] As a result, most children and families continue to live in childcare deserts, places that are chronically underserved, with rural areas particularly hard hit.[2]

Publicly funded school-operated early learning and child care offers several advantages over private provision. School-based programs typically follow mandated curricula designed to promote both social and academic skills, ensuring a balance of cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Educators in these settings are usually certified and have specific training in early childhood education, which can lead to higher-quality interactions and more effective learning experiences for young children.[3] Additionally, being part of a larger school system often means

better access to resources, support services, and educational materials. School-operated preschools also create a smoother transition into the elementary school environment. Parents can also benefit from lower costs due to public funding, making them a more accessible and reliable choice for families.

Subject

Nova Scotia, one of Canada's most easterly provinces, began modifying its early years services 15 years ago, starting with an initiative that provided an early learning program for children the year before school entry (4 years old). Located in a limited number of schools, the Early Years Centre initiative was modelled on the success of Toronto First Duty, which suggested that participation in an integrated school-based service by preschool-aged children improved developmental outcomes.[4] The initiative was also informed by the Better Futures Project in Ontario, which used schools as hubs for early years supports. Evaluations found cost-savings from this model in the Better Futures Project, particularly in reducing the need for future educational interventions.[5,6] Our evaluation documented the development of Early Years Centres and the feasibility of scaling to universal provision.[7,8]

Problems

Publicly offered preschools, while beneficial in many ways, may face political, quality and accessibility challenges.

Flexibility can be an issue with their placement within a school-based setting. Public preschools within schools are confined to schedules, budgets and resources available to the education system, which may be less adaptable than private options and could limit support for children with unique learning needs. Furthermore, public preschools may have less frequent communication with parents through the adoption of school bussing or before/after school programs that can limit family engagement. Lastly, because public preschools are often part of larger school systems, they may experience bureaucratic delays or policy shifts that impact program consistency, resources, or priorities, potentially affecting the quality of education children receive.

Research Context

Mandatory schooling in Nova Scotia begins at age 5 with Grade Primary (known as kindergarten in other parts of the country). The success of the Early Years Centre demonstration sites informed a provincial mandate to ensure all children have access to early childhood education in the year before school entry. The universal Pre-primary Program began in 2017 and, by the 2020-21 school year, was in elementary schools in all seven Regional Centres for Education and le Conseil scolaire acadien provincial. Pre-primary is similar to junior kindergarten in Ontario and the Northwest Territories but offers important distinctions as well.

The program is non-mandatory, includes no-fee access for families and welcomes all children in the school catchment. There are key examples across rural communities, especially those experiencing high levels of poverty, where Pre-primary has directly addressed childcare scarcity and eliminated the stress that families often experience in finding care for their children. The program follows the school day and annual calendar. Children attending Pre-primary are eligible for school busing. The Nova Scotia Before and After Program, provided on-site by community organizations, offers child care with a focus on outdoor, active, and adventurous play.

Key Research Questions

Early research on the Early Years Centre initiative documented families' experiences. It sought to assess parents' views of a 4-year-old program and its potential impact on their children's development and transition into the first year of school. Families spoke to the importance of locating the program in their local school, the connection of the program to the school community, and their recognition of the value of play-based learning.[7,8]

Recent Research Results

A recent scoping review of the literature identified key features of program quality among universal and school-based early learning programs, including an overarching emphasis on system-level policies that support programs through pedagogical and inclusive practices, the co-location of the program within a school-based learning environment, and key people that support the program.[8,9] As is well documented by previous research and studies,[10,11,12] highly trained and well-compensated early childhood educators (ECEs) are a critical feature of program quality. In Nova Scotia, Pre-primary educators with ECE-specific diplomas or degrees implement the province's Early Learning Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes play-based learning through intentional teaching that is deliberate, purposeful, and responsive to children's

explorations, theories, and learning styles.[13] Possessing ECE-specific qualifications provides educators with an understanding of how to design a learning space, select materials, and create early learning experiences that support children's development within a play-based environment.

Research Gaps

Inclusive early childhood education requires educators who are reflective and responsive as they design, implement and support learning environments that welcome all children and families. Inclusive programs acknowledge and celebrate diverse abilities, cultural backgrounds and family structures.9 Research, however, has documented that families with a child with a disability often have limited options for early learning and child care alongside additional financial stressors.[14] Studies on childhood disability in early childhood underscore concern about how inclusion is understood and practiced within early childhood programs.[14,15,16] For families, these concerns can lead to increased stress and emotional fatigue as they navigate limited access alongside concerns for the safety and support of their child's unique health and developmental needs.[14]

Further research in Nova Scotia has noted the limits in the implementation of culturally responsive practice among early learning and child care programs and the existence of Anti-Black racism and xenophobia.[17,18,19] These issues are not unique to early childhood programs, with research demonstrating persistent inequities within public schools, particularly among Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities.[10,20,21] Policy reform is underway to support inclusive education in Nova Scotia's schools; a developmental evaluation has identified the importance of support for educators to ensure effective classroom practices, including professional learning.[22,23]

Conclusions

With access to Pre-primary now secured, a key priority is maintaining high-quality, inclusive, and culturally responsive programs. While the placement of early childhood education in schools can support accessibility, there remains tension between play-based pedagogies and the increasing pressure for evidence of outcomes in academic skills, sometimes referred to as "schoolification.' This approach necessitates providing proof of school readiness rather than promoting an understanding of the need to provide time and opportunity to develop complex skills that are foundational to life-long learning.[12]

Partnerships among ECEs working in school-based programs with school administrators, elementary school teachers, and families are critical to high-quality early childhood programs[9] enabling a shift toward “playification” of a curriculum, in which skills such as curiosity, discovery and competency are fostered through intentionally designed opportunities for play.[24] Research underway in Nova Scotia used a photo-elicitation methodology with ECEs working in pre-primary programs focused on numeracy and literacy learning through play. This research provided illustrative examples of learning through play and facilitated discussions of what this includes and requires within a play-based approach being supported within a school context.[25]

Implications for Service Providers and Policymakers

As Canada works toward developing a high-quality, accessible, affordable system of early learning and child care, the infrastructure provided through the public school system is an opportunity to create much-needed childcare spaces. However, simply co-locating early learning programs within a school building does not automatically result in quality experiences for children, educators, and families. Care must be taken to ensure that policies are developed that acknowledge and support the requirements of high-quality programs through supportive administrators and intentional linkages to early elementary schooling that bring attention to the value of learning through play. Programs also need purpose-built spaces with qualified and well-remunerated educators who are supported to foster inclusive, respectful, and culturally responsive practices for all families and children.

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