Why is the public school system important in building early learning?

Maureen Dockendorf, MEd, Educational Consultant, Canada, Faye Brownlie, MEd, Educational Consultant, Canada

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Introduction

The Canadian public school system is one of the strongest in the world. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),[1] in the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Canadian public schools scored in the top 10 countries in reading, math and science among secondary school students, above Australia, New Zealand, the UK, United States, and Ireland.[2] Particularly significant is Canada scores well in both achievement and equity. Canadian students tend to perform well regardless of differences in their socioeconomic background.

Both achievement and equity count, but equity is especially significant if we are to build and hold trust in our public institutions.[3] A founding principle of public education is equity. Enrolment is a right regardless of location, race, religion, social status, language, degree of privilege, or special needs of the child.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2023, the gap between rich and poor in Canada grew at the fastest pace on record. The top 20% of earners held 67.8 % of the country's net worth, compared with the bottom 40% holding 2.7%.[4] Schools can and do help close the equity gap but cannot fully compensate children from low-income families with the many enriching experiences and opportunities that more privileged children enjoy.

Subject

Research continues to reinforce the value of investing in early childhood education, including stronger literacy and numeracy, increased self-regulation, and more positive social-emotional skills for children who have access to early years programs and services. The earlier we invite families into the public school system, the better. Public school systems have existing infrastructures which can promote positive transitions from childcare into the school system.

Problems

Separate childcare and school systems for young learners can lead to several challenges:

- When early childhood education and formal schooling operate independently, children may encounter inconsistent teaching methods and curricula, disrupting the continuity of their learning and development.[4]
- Childcare services are not universally available and charge fees excluding many low and moderate-income families.
- Public preschools typically employ trained teachers who are predominantly white, while childcare may have racialized educators without degrees. This segregation can perpetuate inequalities in educational quality and outcomes.[5]
- Separate systems require distinct administrative structures, leading to duplicated efforts and higher operational costs.[6]
- Families navigating separate systems may face challenges in understanding and engaging with differing expectations and communication channels, potentially hindering their involvement in their child's education.[7]

Research Context

British Columbia's "Seamless Day" is an example of utilizing the public school infrastructure to implement quality early learning initiatives that provide ongoing opportunities for greater collaboration between adults working with young children across various settings.

Beginning in 2019, the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care implemented the Seamless Day Kindergarten initiative. Rather than just locating childcare programs in schools, Seamless Day creates educational teams of certified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and Kindergarten teachers working in the kindergarten classroom. The Seamless Day framework aims to develop continuity as children transition from one setting to another through seamless support and communication. Continuity of learning is enabled by strengthening relationships between ECEs and teachers, creating similarities in learning environments, and a shared mindset with common pedagogy and practices, using the *BC Early Learning Framework* to guide curriculum.

The Seamless Day begins in the before-school environment. ECEs greet families in the kindergarten classroom before the school day begins, continue to support learning alongside the kindergarten teacher during the school day and resume learning activities after the formal school day ends. The teaching team collaborates to provide joyful experiences for children to explore and play.

The wrap-around continuity of programming and activities and the collaborative knowledge of the child and the family create smooth transitions, which is especially important for vulnerable children who have the most to lose from a fragmented approach. Strong transitions can improve equity in young children's education outcomes.

Key Research Questions

What impact does the integration have on early literacy and numeracy skills?
Does integrated programming improve school readiness and long-term educational achievement?
How does integration influence children's sense of belonging and classroom engagement?

Recent Research Results

Central to a thriving primary classroom is oral language. In this environment, children whose home language is more functional than expansive grow their vocabulary and sentence structure. All children learn to use their language to express their needs, interact with one another, observe, notice and wonder. They become readers, writers, speakers, listeners and thinkers in a

community where all belong. Children are engaged in whole-class learning, small-group learning, and individual work. Teachers model, provide opportunities for guided and independent practice, and watch for children displaying, in different contexts, the skills and strategies that have been taught. This model of gradual release of responsibility enables all children to progress at their rate and to have the support and modeling of those around them.

In *Every Child, Every Day*, researchers Allington and Gabriel[8] developed six elements of daily instruction, which when used allow more than 95% of children to read at grade level by the end of grade one.

1. Every child reads something of their choosing. Choice matters enormously. When given a choice, engagement increases, and children experience the joy and purpose of reading.
2. Every child reads accurately. At some point every day, children need books that they can read. These books will blend decodable words and sight words and enable children to increase the number of words they read automatically.
3. Every child reads something they understand. This is the goal of reading – understanding. Children need daily practice in reading for meaning, first in a group, then independently.
4. Every child writes something personally meaningful. Reading and writing are reciprocal processes. Many children learn about letters and sounds as they are instructed in phonics and phonemic awareness, and they put these skills to work in writing. Beginning with drawing and adding letters, sounds, and words to their sketches, they record their stories and share them with others. All children have stories to share. Their background knowledge, cultural experiences, and languages are important resources.
5. Every child talks to their peers about their reading and their writing. Given choice in reading, expecting to write daily about shared experiences from the class, personal experiences, or flights of imagination sets children up for sharing, which, in turn, helps build community, confidence and competence.
6. Every child listens to a fluent adult read aloud. This invitation into a story expands a child's world and builds their vocabulary and sense of text.

Vocabulary growth is significant in closing the gap for young children. Children who are never read to at home are exposed to approximately 300,000 fewer words than children who are read to once day per day from birth to 5 years of age.[9] Reading at school can compensate for this gap,

and can be critical to second language learners. They hear both the words and the cadence and rhythm of language.

Research Gaps

Integrated early education and child care is a new and not widely used delivery model. As a result, most studies focus on immediate skill development, lacking data on sustained academic progress. There is also insufficient comparative analysis between integrated and non-integrated systems, making it challenging to isolate those elements of program integration which provide benefits. Additionally, diversity factors such as socio-economic status, linguistic background, and cultural variations remain underexplored, particularly how these affect literacy gains in integrated models. Another gap involves the professional collaboration between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, with limited insights into how joint pedagogical strategies influence literacy development. Furthermore, research often overlooks the impact of policy variations and funding models on the quality of literacy instruction in integrated settings. Addressing these gaps can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how integration influences early literacy outcomes.

Conclusions

Research on the impact of integrated education and child care on children's early literacy generally indicates positive outcomes, emphasizing improved language development, vocabulary expansion, and foundational literacy skills. Studies have shown that children in integrated settings benefit from continuous learning experiences facilitated by collaborative teaching between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers. This approach enhances the consistency of literacy instruction and exposure to language-rich environments, particularly benefiting children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. However, research highlights variability based on program quality, teacher qualifications, and family engagement levels. Longitudinal studies suggest that early literacy benefits can extend into later academic achievement, though further evidence is needed to confirm long-term effects. Moreover, when schools meet the needs of parents for childcare, and the developmental needs of children, trust in public education is enhanced.

As Dr. Maren Aukerman of the University of Calgary says, ‘Literacy is shaped by culture and context, is social, and involves emotions.’[10] The public system embraces our rich, Canadian

diversity of learners. Together, we are better. In the public system, we embrace diversity, celebrate it, and are richer for it.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

For parents, models that streamlined access to both early learning and child care, reduce logistical challenges and promote consistent care routines. The continuity between early education and care also enhances parental confidence in the quality of services, supporting their involvement in their child's development. For services, integration fosters collaboration between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, leading to more cohesive instructional practices and improved early literacy outcomes. It also encourages professional development and shared pedagogical strategies. From a policy perspective, integrated models require harmonized funding frameworks and consistent quality standards across childcare and education sectors. Policies must address equitable access, ensuring that families from diverse backgrounds benefit equally. Additionally, policymakers must focus on sustainable funding, professional standards, and inclusion strategies to maximize the benefits of integrated early learning systems for all children.

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