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Preschool Programs: Effective Curriculum. Comments on Melhuish and Barnes, Kagan and Kauerz, Schweinhart, and Leseman

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Introduction

Canadian preschool programs offer organized environments to young children prior to entry into Grade 1. Preschool programs are early childhood education opportunities characterized by recurrent experiences that are 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.[1]

In Canada over 50% of children between ages 2 and 4 attend a preschool program.[2] Possible settings include child care centres, nursery schools, preschools, prekindergarten, junior kindergarten, kindergarten, child development centres, play groups and Aboriginal Head Start.[2] They may be offered as part of the public education system, non-profit or commercial

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organizations. A few preschool programs are offered by municipal governments or postsecondary institutions. At age 5, all children are entitled to a kindergarten or primary program offered as the first year of elementary schooling and approximately 95% of them participate.[2]

Canadians are joining others around the world in recognizing that children are young citizens who have a right to the best possible childhood and that includes opportunities to participate in early childhood education.

If early childhood education programs are to be equitable opportunities for all preschool children, they must pay attention to the context of young children's lives. Early childhood education programs are social experiences that guide children's learning about the world around them and must reflect differences in culture. The social context is a critical element to take into account in considering how children learn and develop. Family structure, social and economic characteristics, community influences, and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are the context for early learning. Making sure each child is welcome and each family has a sense of belonging are prerequisites to early learning.[3]

In the past few years, Canadian jurisdictions have followed several international jurisdictions in developing curriculum frameworks to support early childhood education.[4] The framework documents guide planning without enforcing a particular curriculum model or pedagogical approach. They share common design principles that echo research findings from the United Kingdom,[5] the United States,[6] New Zealand[7] and the Organization of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD).[8]

Research and Conclusions

Edward Melhuish and Jacqueline Barnes[5] conclude that all children benefit from participation in high quality early childhood education programs from age 2.[9] Vulnerable and disadvantaged children may benefit more because they enter with fewer resources and assets, but children from more affluent families and well-resourced home learning environments also benefit. Evidence from longstanding preschools in France, Switzerland and Norway – expanded access to preschool programs since the 1970s – has demonstrated benefits for later educational and labour market outcomes.[5]

In the U.K., the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in England followed a large sample of 3,000 children from preschool to school entry and into elementary and secondary

school.[10,11,12] The sample included children in a range of early childhood programs as well as those who were at home full-time. The beneficial effects of preschool for all children remain evident at age 14 years. The EPPE study included related qualitative case studies that identified key elements that support effective delivery.[13,14] Cognitive and social development are viewed as complementary. Staffing includes strong pedagogical leadership and long-serving educators who have curriculum and pedagogy knowledge and expertise. A strong educational focus is evident and children experience a mix of child- and educator-initiative activities. Educator-child interactions involve sustained shared thinking and educators frequently provide formative feedback to children during activities. Learning activities are differentiated to meet individual needs and policies support self-regulation rather than a behaviour management approach. Parents are involved, particularly in working with educators to establish educational aims for their children.

Lawrence Schweinhart[15] of the High/Scope Education Research Foundation has been a lead researcher of the Perry Preschool Program Study since the 1970s. 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 U.S. and internationally, including Canada.

Schweinhart[15] 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[16] and the Chicago Longitudinal Study of Child-Parent Centres.[17] 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.[18]

The recent avalanche of research about preschool programs drives a strong message that early childhood education can mitigate negative early experiences and redirect young children’s development to more productive trajectories. Heightened awareness about early human development, particularly early brain development in setting the foundation for life long

learning, behaviour and health[2] coupled with concerns about children's social, emotional and intellectual developmental difficulties at school entry,[19] has turned the attention of developmental and neuroscience researchers to what children do in preschool programs.

Paul Leseman[20] points out the emphasis many preschool programs place on academic curricula that are intended to prepare children for school. He proposes attention to a suite of learning-related skills often called executive functions that are an integral part of self-regulation.Leseman [20] notes that self-regulation involves attention, working memory, inhibition and shifting and higher order planning and monitoring, as well as the ability to adapt to new situations and challenges. He argues that these are the skills that children need to learn to acquire metacognitive awareness and the learning to learn abilities. Preschool programs can employ a pedagogocial approach that encourages children's choices, collaboration with each other and explicit awareness of their own learning and emotions. Pretend and sociodramatic play, problem-solving activities, opportunities for risk and stories with emotional content provide experiences that contribute to emotional, behavioural and attention self-regulation.[21] Educators who are sensitive to children's needs and to rules and routines that improve the room's socio-emotional climate contribute to emotional self-regulation. Leseman[20] does not advocate abandoning curriculum content related to literacy, numeracy and inquiry in preschool programs. Rather he recommends ensuring that the content is embedded into environments and pedagogy that promote essential learning-related skills.

Economist James Heckman and his colleagues proclaim that "skill begets skill"[22] and that investment in early child development, particularly quality early childhood education pays back a high return on investment. Getting children on positive trajectories in Grade 1 is a proven strategy to improve the life chances of an individual's and a society's human capital. The real drivers are what Heckman calls "soft skill" or personality traits – perseverance, ability to attend and ignore distractions, conscientiousness and sociability.[23] These skills can also be viewed as self-regulation of emotion, behaviour and attention.

Canadian[24] and American[25] reviews of the pedagogy of play propose that children are 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 educator's knowledge of child development, observation and documentation of the child's activities, and the child's family and community context.

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Implications for Policy and Practice

Canadian preschool curriculum frameworks exist along a continuum of adult-guided to child-directed approaches.[20] They include intentional and spontaneous opportunities for learning that may be child-directed or adult-guided. Most early childhood programs have elements of both child-directed play and adult-guided instruction, but it is the balance between the two that varies.

In more adult-guided approaches, early childhood educators set up the environment and select activities related to a set of learning outcomes or expectations – for example, Montessori, High/Scope, or Sesame Street. Kagan and Kauerz[6] and Schweinhart[15] 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 U.S.. Across Canada, kindergarten curricula follow a teacher-guided approach and are organized to encourage children's attainment of identified learning expectations.

In child-directed curriculum approaches, children's interests and emerging skills and aptitudes drive curriculum – for example, emergent curriculum and Reggio Emilia. Leseman[20] promotes an organized and planned curriculum direction and references specific, defined approaches, but he does not advocate a prescribed curriculum or predetermined learning expectations. Rather, he recommends pedagogical principles consistent with a child-directed approach that reflective practitioners can draw on to respond to a specific group of children. .

Child-directed 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.

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The most effective curriculum is probably custom-designed for each preschool program based on an agreed upon set of design principles and knowledge about different types of approaches. The implementation of ready-made program models might be easier at first but they are usually less effective (in terms of children's outcomes) than programs that construct their own learning environments. Having a clear program direction and specific learning goals for children and families is more important than which program model is adopted. Putting together a custom learning environment is more effective than trying to transplant a particular curriculum approach.

The critical element that runs across effective preschool programs is a skilled early childhood workforce. Early childhood educators who are reflective and responsive practitioners are essential in establishing preschool programs as effective early learning environments.

Early childhood educators intentionally guide and construct opportunities to extend children's learning. Pedagogical strategies across the continuum from child-directed to teacher-guided approaches provide structure and direction for educators who support the development of capacities and skills while respecting a child's interests and choices. Effective educators use a repertoire of strategies that includes sustained shared thinking and guided learning; investigation and exploration; modelling and demonstrating; open questioning, speculating and explaining; and, explicit or direct instruction.

Preschool children can thrive in a variety of early childhood education program models with knowledgeable and responsive educators who are sensitive to their individual and collective learning dispositions. As Canada moves towards offering opportunities to all preschool children, program design will require continued commitment from educators, policy makers and families.

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