

Atkinson Centre Internship Report

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Early Childhood Environmental Education and Sustainability

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The primary focus of my work with the Atkinson Centre involved research and planning around educator training and professional development for Early Childhood Education and Primary/Junior teaching, in light of the new ECE/Teacher teaching model for kindergarten programs for Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten (FDELK) in Ontario. My specific tasks included:

- Organizing an ECE/Education Faculty Symposium;
- Participating in the FDELK curriculum review for the Ministry of Education on behalf of the Atkinson Centre and contributing an *Issue that Matters* brief on the FDELK curriculum review;
- Participating in an Environment Scan of ECE and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) of post-secondary training across Ontario's colleges in ECE and Faculties of Education to open up dialogue for next steps in post-secondary training in education, in light of the new policy climate for early learning.

Current Policy Climate for ECE

Ontario made a significant shift in early childhood policy when responsibility for early childhood education and care moved from the Ministry of Community and Social Services to the Ministry of Education. Several decades of research and advocacy on the importance of high quality early childhood education and care for children, families, and society seems to have raised the profile of early learning in public consciousness, yet, there is still a long road ahead for the fruition of a universally accessible child care system in Ontario and across Canada. The paucity of such a system in Ontario is perplexing, considering the number of regions across the globe where universally accessible early learning programs exist. These early learning frameworks are noted for their capacity to support women's equity, reduce child poverty, and appropriately compensate ECEs for their professional and pedagogical skills in early learning. Most importantly, children are offered a place in society that honours a child's way of knowing the world and "the potentialities of everyday lived experiences" (Kraftl, 2009, p.79). However, the above-mentioned qualities around early childhood education and care are generally subordinate to the economic benefits that are deemed as a priority in Ontario's technocratic neoliberal policy climate.

Moving towards training in Early Years Specialization

The provincial government seems keen to understand more about early learning by welcoming reports about how early learning can be implemented in Ontario. Three key reports collectively identified concrete frameworks for how Ontario can lead in developing early learning models include, *Investing in Quality*, 2007; *Early Learning for Every Child Today*

(ELECT), 2007; and *With Our Best Future in Mind*, 2009. These reports all commit to policy change for an early years framework that value children, families, and early childhood practitioners. These reports brought together researchers, practitioners, and various stakeholders and were developed from a range of international research in child development, early years curriculum, and policy frameworks that modeled what works to support children and families.

The report by Ontario's Early Learning Advisor, Charles Pascal, *With our Best Future in Mind* (2009), appears to be the catalyst for the most recent changes to Kindergarten in Ontario. The changes build on the suggestion that a full day kindergarten program, offered by an ECE and a certified teacher, and establishing a continuity of relationships and places of learning that is play-based, will better support children's life-long learning. The movement towards an early learning framework for Ontario may be the stepping-stone towards building more cohesion and collaboration among educators who work with young children.

Bridging ECE and Education: Symposium and environment scan

Bringing together faculties of ECE and Education for the Faculty Symposium is the beginning of a trend that will hopefully continue as a way to support stronger collaboration between the two fields. While collaboration is beginning in kindergarten classrooms, the road ahead will involve learning in how education and ECE can work together without losing core values that underlie early learning. Conducting the Environment Scan was a particularly interesting project as I learned a little bit more about how courses and programs develop at the post-secondary level. Further, part of my research interests includes finding potential for integrating coursework in early childhood environmental education at the post-secondary level for ECEs in training, as a channel to increase children's access to outdoor, nature-based experiences in early childhood. The intention of the scans was to discover gaps and overlaps in training for teachers and ECEs; and how various educators are being prepared to meet the learning needs of young children in the changing policy climate.

References

Kraftl, P. (2009). Utopia, childhood and intention. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 13(1). 69-88.