

An Evidence-Based Response to Maclean's Article on Early Child Education

The Maclean's article, *The Munchkin Invasion* (May 27/2013 issue), acknowledges the strong and positive reaction that teachers and parents in Ontario have to full day kindergarten for four and five year olds. The article also makes passing mention of our recent Ontario-based research that shows very positive cognitive gains for kids in the full-time program compared to those in the traditional half time programs but makes no mention of the social gains shown by the research. The author also refers to the program as "all day instruction" implying that small children are sitting in rows receiving "instruction" rather than the excellent inquiry and play-based environment that focuses on the individual differences of the children and has been demonstrated to increase their motivation to learn. This is the first hint that the Maclean's piece didn't want facts to get in the way of a "good story".

The major problem with the current discourse regarding the efficacy of early learning, deals with the challenge of comparing research studies that purport to measure the short, medium and long-range benefits of early child education. A classic example is the implications taken from the U.S. data cited in the Maclean's piece. This study of the American experience suffers from the fruit salad problem in research—the proverbial apples and oranges comparison when things that are different are taken as sameness. Maclean's featured study noted that short term gains for young kids don't hold up and a half day is just as good as a full day. Unfortunately, this study, as with too many others, did not take account of the use of a consistent and measurable high quality curriculum and pedagogy. The U.S. kindergartens studied more

than a decade ago were more likely to include instructional drill rather than Ontario's well-researched inquiry-based curriculum. This U.S. study focused only on five year olds and did not control for two years of high quality early education.

Making assumptions about how well the Ontario program is working for four and five year old kids based on research that bears no resemblance to both the quality and length of exposure in the Ontario program, is not helpful to advancing informed conversations. Ok for cocktail parties but not useful for serious discourse.

The balance of the Maclean's piece illustrates, by commission and omission, a mix of references to superficial and ideologically driven assumptions. While the author seems to have skimmed our report—*With Our Best Future in Mind*—he completely ignored the report's companion piece--a summary of international best evidence regarding early childhood education and its benefits.

The author trumpets concerns about the costs of the program, takes a costing prediction out of context, and makes no reference to some of most impressive economic research that is available on the early years return on investment. Rather, his preference is to quote from a report, long since shelved, that focused solely on slashing government spending regardless of medium and longer-range social and economic impacts. He goes on to observe that Ontario is already doing well regarding international test scores, as number one in the English speaking world but parenthetically notes "concerns about at risk children notwithstanding" as though 28

percent of our children who are showing up in grade one vulnerable is a small thing. Maclean's also fails to note that for every 1 percent drop in that vulnerability rate, 1 percent is added to the GDP over the life course of that 1 percent cohort who are no longer vulnerable.

Maclean's also quotes an author who argues that kids are better off at home. Without question, very early attachment with parents is naturally beneficial. That's why parental leave is so important for infants. No doubt there are some parents who can create a totally stimulating environment at home that includes a few other kids for socialization, employs proper pedagogy, great nutrition and recreation and keeps the kids away from TV screens and backseat rides all over town to witness the errands of a busy at home parent. Sadly, this is not the reality for many children.

As kids approach the first grade transition to school, the benefits of an enriched non-parental environment provide remarkable and lasting cognitive, emotional and social gains all aimed at reducing serious vulnerabilities. The author picks a single cherry by quoting only one parent about how tiring the full day program is for his child. Where are the voices of parents whose daily hassles are reduced by having access to high quality full day programming for their children and from educators who are awed by the benefits they are seeing? The author does note our point that Canada leads all OECD countries regarding women's participation in the workforce -- another reason why high quality childcare and full day learning is important.

The real story in Ontario is that the preliminary results are very promising and good ongoing research and evaluation will continue to make the program better over time. After just three years, it is more than a bit premature to use largely irrelevant U.S. research to imply that Ontario's program will not have the long lasting social and economic impact that a mountain of good evidence predicts.

Charles E. Pascal

Professor of Applied Psychology and Human Development

OISE/University of Toronto

Janette Pelletier

Professor & Director of the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study

OISE/University of Toronto