

***The Early Years Last a Lifetime***  
Proceedings Report  
***Growing Education Down to Include The Early Years***  
Clovelly Golf Course, St. John's, NL  
May 15, 2014

## **Introduction**

Under the auspices of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, and in collaboration with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, Memorial University of Newfoundland, a day-long symposium was held to explore the current research on:

- Self-Regulation and play
- Benefits of full day Kindergarten
- Quality Early Child Education
- Integrated models of Early Child Education

This was the third session in the series on Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Newfoundland and Labrador organized by the Pratt Foundation. There were approximately 160 participants in attendance including individuals involved and/or interested in early childhood development, education, learning, and care and the future it holds in the province.

There were three guest speakers:

1. Dr. Carl Corter, Professor Emeritus at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto
2. Dr. Janette Pelletier is Professor of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)/University of Toronto
3. Jane Bertrand, Program Director, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation.

The symposium was also streamed live on the internet with the support of the Harris Centre.

## **Guest speakers and their presentations**

Dr. David Philpott, Research chair, Jimmy Pratt Foundation, welcomed participants and guest speakers and provided the background and context for the event, situating it in the symposium series.

### **Session 1: Jane Bertrand**

Jane began the conversation by setting the national context. Common trends included:

- Move toward integrated governance into Ministries of Education
- Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) to over 80+% of Canadian schools
- Publication of Early Learning frameworks, common curriculum
  - Self Regulation is a dominant theme in Early Learning Frameworks
  - Frameworks focus on 10-8 years, a fluid curriculum transitioning into the secondary system
  - Play base learning is also common to curriculum frameworks
- Efforts to improve the wages and qualifications of Early Child Educators

- Quality measure instruments to track quality (EDI is an example)
- All provinces have increased budgets on ECE
- Access to ECE has increased through education reaching down to include the early years. The number of ECE seats have stagnated
- Early Years 3 has been really well received
- Early Years Index, a part of the Early Years 3, has become a powerful Index. Canada ranks last, in an international context. NL ranks last in Canada. Jane explained how the index works
- International recognition of the importance of public investment in ECE
- Atkinson Center weekly newsletter on the emerging research/policy on ECE

### **Session 2: Dr. Carl Corter**

Carl continued the conversation with a presentation entitled: “The Continuum of Education and Development Begins in Early Childhood”. Highlights included:

- The need to reform education to include the early years
- Discussed the research of the late Fraser Mustard on early human development
  - Experience-based brain development and the importance of epigenetics in redirecting children’s neurological development
  - The impact of ECE on reading scores
  - The social, emotional and behavioral impact of ECE
  - Self-regulation underlies quality ECE and is the predictor of lifelong success
- Growing recognition in contemporary media of ECE’s ability to predict, economic, educational, social, health success later in life
- The role of parents is also central. Even though more parents need to work – need to support busy parents in positive interaction with their child
- Labor market benefits from ECE, critical aspect as economies shift and struggle to meet workforce demands

### **Session 3: Dr. Jan Pelletier**

Jan’s presentation brought the voice of children to our conversation, from her research on FDK versus those in ½ day K. She cited quotes from the children themselves. Themes included:

- Children in ½ DK and other care facilities speak more about their transitions across sites and less about their friends and experiences.
- FDK children speak more about play, social interactions, and their self-management
- Play is central to a child’s daily experience
- FDK children’s art is much more complex and detailed than ½ DK
- Children’s voices helps us understand what works and what doesn’t work

### **Session 4: Carl Corter**

“Integrated Systems and Quality Early Learning Environments for the Whole Child and Family”. Carl presented models where Family Resource Centers, ECE, Junior Kindergarten and FDK are all integrated into the neighborhood school, creating a seamless model of care. His talk used the Toronto First Duty (TFD) model and their experiences, as an example which can inform others. He also cautioned that integrated models can have different models, contextualized to a communities needs. Highlights included:

- If we believe children are whole beings then why do we silo service deliver?
- School is normative and universal, it is the natural site for education. It is in every community and easily accessible. By connecting schools with ECE you build community and capacity

- International evidence to show that integrating services works well (US, UK, AUS)
- Integrated models provide a unique and holistic support services to empower parents.
- TFD was established to provide comprehensive services to every child 0-6 in one site and research the effectiveness of the model. Repurposed facilities and services into a new model. He cited Michael Fullan in saying the approach of building this is: “Ready, Fire, Aim” – start now and make it better as you go
- Top-down leadership is essential, with support and a commitment to make it work, as you go but also with strong bottom-up teamwork
- Research shows that learning environments, collaboration, governance, seamless access and parent participation, all improved dramatically in an integrated model. It can be done!
- When the quality of structure of the site dips, children’s language skills also dips
- Families report multiple, holistic benefits for the family, in addition to less hassle in childcare – across socio-economic differences.
- Demographics didn’t affect enrollment of participation, with one exception Mom’s with low Socio economic status had higher participation
- Parents become more involved and more confident in helping their child at home by the time they reach Kindergarten (after 4 years of being involved in the setting). This finding held across socio-economic differences
- Multiple indicators of the children’s development: physical health and well being, health and human development, General knowledge and academic progress all showed dramatic improvement.

The morning session ended with table conversations, in which participants identified pertinent questions based on the morning presentations.

### **Session 5: Jan Pelletier**

“Full Day Kindergarten in Ontario - Benefits and Potential”. Jan started the afternoon session with the findings from her recent research on FDK. Some of these findings have not yet been published. Jan’s research has followed children who have FDK and those who have ½ DK (in areas of Ontario where it is not yet implemented), exploring multiple indicators of impact. Her findings include:

- The controversy stems largely from the media’s interpretation of the data - focusing solely on narrow findings and not the full picture
- Longitudinal study following children from Junior Kindergarten through Grade Three, with two groups: those who had FDK and those who didn’t
- Every FDK classroom has an Early Child Educator embedded with the Kindergarten teacher
- Families LOVE it, but so do the teachers who report that it improves their professional skills in collaboration and planning
- The staff team, while beneficial, but there are challenges, mostly around working conditions, planning time and salary differences
- FDK classrooms have higher quality of learning environment
- Parents of FDK report a significant decrease in family stress and feel more engaged with their child’s educational program. Parents of FDK rated their children as being significantly more ready, on multiple indicators, to move ahead than ½ DK
- Vocabulary skills much higher in FDK children. They stay ahead for the long term
- Reading and number skills were also higher in FDK but less so than Vocabulary Skills
- Writing skills were also significantly higher and have maintained that advantage

- These results improve as ON introduces more children and the teaching team improves its efficiency
- Self Regulation (inhibitory self control, working memory, cognitive planning, and cognitive flexibility) was significantly higher in FDK children

Carl discussed some of the challenges Ontario faces with FDK:

- Maintaining the early gains that come out of FDK
- Building an integrated ECE platform down to include the early years – starting earlier with these children. Develop an ECE framework that situates FDK in a continuum of quality care
- Sustaining the political will to support this in the long-term, across governments
- Developing a strong play-based curriculum and optimizing the training to deliver it well
- Ensuring a strong commitment to realistic public policy, that evolves with the research finding
- Develop a Child Observation framework that allows us to collect data on what is actually happening in each class, with each child, to inform programs and policies

### **Session 6: Jan and Carl**

The day concluded with a joint presentation: “The Role of Quality Play in Literacy Learning and Self-Regulation”. The presenters discussed the emerging research, from them and others, in these areas.

Highlights include:

- Play is part of healthy development and completely natural to children
- Play is vital to human development and survival, the impulse to play is a biological drive
- Play promotes brain development, social skills and self-regulation
- Play does not compete with academics, it is the basis of learning and development> It has many models. Examples include:
  - Cognitive Play – thinking and planning
  - Functional Play – repetitive actions
  - Constructive Play – building something
  - Dramatic Play – involves pretend and others
  - Social Play – interactive
  - Solitary Play – with oneself
  - Parallel Play – collective
  - Interactive Play – common goal
  - Locomotor Play – large body activity
  - Object Play – with toys
- Dramatic play is what is featured in a play-based curriculum as it promotes social and neurological development. It strengthens social literacy. It strengthens story comprehension
- While play is difficult to define, children can differentiate it from work with ease – and accuracy!
- Play is particularly important for boys as it teaches them inhibition control. They need active play – especially the very active boys. They need the outlet in order to settle. Play fighting is an important part of this outlet – with limits and boundaries clearly defined.
- Play is not a singular construct but part of a continuum of behaviors which promotes broader competencies such as theory of mind, symbolic representation and self regulation
- Phonological awareness, letter recognition, numeracy, and early writing can all be encouraged through play

In conclusion, participants were enthusiastic and engaged, welcoming such a new articulation of education and its link with ECE. Many participants were educators from the secondary school system (from all parts of the province) and have had limited conversations on education's link with ECE. The opportunity to rearticulate what it is we mean by "education" and "schools" is timely as we move closer to FDK in the province. Schools must become more inclusive of the needs of their community and their children. Learning begins before age 5.

Full Day Kindergarten is a step toward quality and accessible ECE. It's an important step, but it is one step as part of a bigger picture. Participants identified a number of key questions on Government's plan for FDK and where it fits into a comprehensive plan for quality ECE in this province. These include:

1. What is Government's plan for implementing FDK? Will it be phased in or complete implementation in 2016? What will be the class size? Will it be mandatory? Will they follow Ontario's model and embed an Early Child Educator in each class with the Kindergarten teacher? How will they prepare Kindergarten teachers with the skills to implement a play-based curriculum effectively?
2. Is there a role for a demonstration site for an integrated model, which can inform the province on a more comprehensive model of service delivery?
3. What is their plan to deal with 70% of existing ECE spaces are unregulated?
4. How do we organize widely different sectors and service providers toward a cohesive model?
5. What is the plan to accommodate students with exceptionalities in an inclusive FDK?
6. When will the province commit to Junior Kindergarten?
7. Who decides whether a school can develop a childcare space if they want?
8. Where is Government's Early Child Care plan? What is the bigger picture for where FDK fits in ECE for our province?

The final proceedings report will be posted on the Jimmy Pratt Foundation website.

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