

The Full Day Kindergarten Classroom in Ontario: Exploring Play-based Learning Approach and its Implications for Child Development

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Research Overview

A qualitative research study examining Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) teaching practices.

The Focus: Key Research Questions

1. What kinds of teaching practices are evident in the FDK 'play-based' learning classroom?
2. What are the key elements for consideration in setting up of the FDK classroom?
3. What are teachers' perspectives of and challenges with the implementation of the FDK program?

Statement of the Problem: In order to understand components and factors that affect quality we need to look closer at teaching practices in the Kindergarten classroom to make quality more visible and become more aware about FDK practices and see what shifts are happening in the classroom.

Why am I interested in the Problem? FDK implementation is current and organic in teaching and more research and insight on FDK is informative.

Research Design & Methodology

- **Qualitative Research Design** – empirical case study - collected rich descriptive data on FDK classroom practices from eight teachers (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995.; Freebody, 2004)
- Use of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, artifacts and photos (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006; Yin, 2003; Cohen and Manion, 2000; Denzin, 2006) and use of 'triangulation' to improve reliability and validity of study instruments
- **Sample Size:** Eight FDK teachers from one school district and two schools. **Sample Criteria:** similar demographic area (socioeconomic status, some students at risk), and student body both had high ESL composition, some special needs students; teachers had a minimum of two years of FDK experience

Introduction

Across Canada policymakers are looking to expand children's access to early childhood education. In 2007, the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning introduced the document 'The Early Learning for Every Child Today' and established a framework to guide the development of Ontario early childhood settings. In September 2010, Bill 242 – Full Day Early Learning Statute – Law Amendment Act came into effect and started the process of changing Kindergarten learning in Ontario public schools from a half-day to a full-day program. The Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (FDELKP) outlined the vision, purpose and goals of the new FDK curriculum. It was a part of an overall plan to help more children have a strong start in school. Mustard (2006) conducted studies showing that early brain development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. Shonkoff and Philips (2000) showed that genes set the parameters for basic structures of the developing brain, but a child's interactions and relationships with his or her parents and significant others establish neural circuits and shape the brain. Clearly, the scientific evidence points to the importance of quality early years education programs. Recently, proposals for free full-day child care for aged 2 1/2 years to Kindergarten in Ontario shows the value of child care as an investment in economic growth and prosperity in the future. This current research study investigates FDK teaching practices in eight Kindergarten classrooms and the quality of these FDK programs.

Demographics of Classroom

Class	Number of students	Number of boys	Number of girls	%B	%G
Class 1	30	16	14	53%	47%
Class 2	29	15	14	48%	52%
Class 3	29	14	15	48%	52%
Class 4	28	15	13	50%	50%
Class 5	29	13	16	45%	55%
Class 6	28	14	14	50%	50%
Class 7	32	17	15	46%	54%
Class 8	31	17	14	55%	45%

Significant Finding – All classrooms were above the Ministry class size limit of 26 students. Reducing Class Size would improve quality of the program. Also in comparison to other provinces, Ontario has the highest class limit. In the past, 20 was the cap in Ontario when HDK program in effect.

Designing my EYE Model

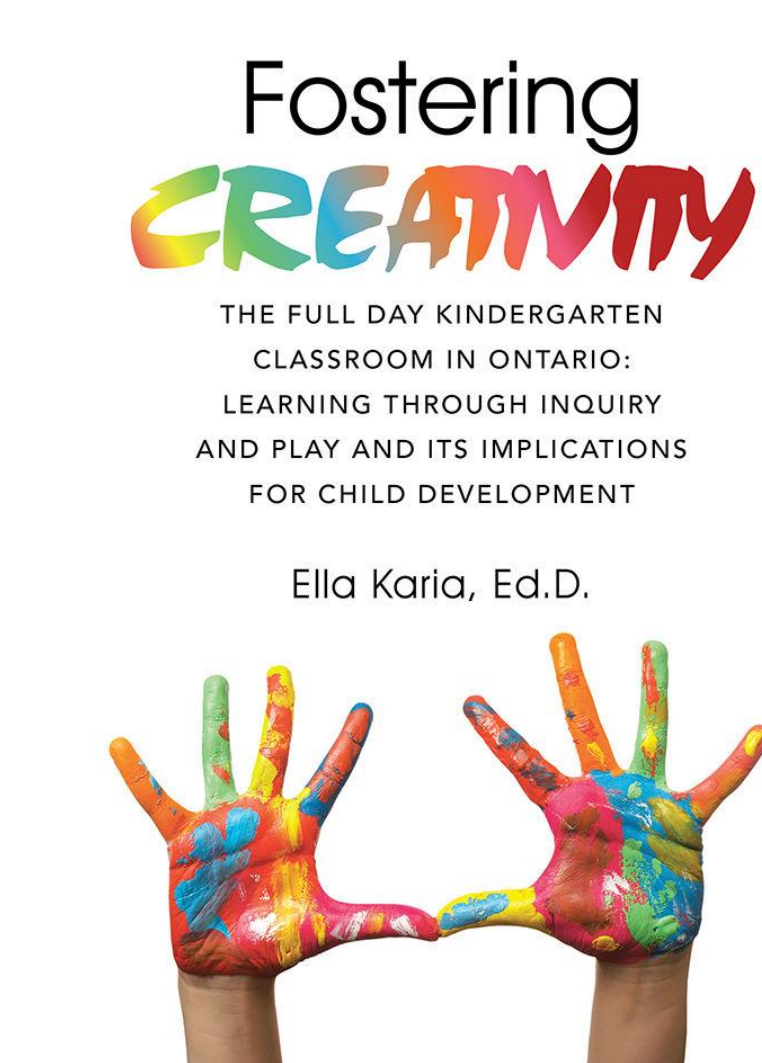
Five Elements of FDK: PIECE Model developed
Play-based, Inquiry-focus, Experiential learning, Child-centred & Environmental education
PIE Model led to the design of the EYE Model
Developmental Domains: Physical, Social, Emotional, Cognitive, Communicative, Spiritual

The EYE (Early Years Education) Model
(Holistic, integrated and comprehensive approach for quality FDK)

Adding the 6th Domain
Spiritual Domain

Developing the ECE and Teacher Partnership

Methodology



The five key elements of the FDK program were examined through the PIECE model. The teaching and learning practices integrated various educational philosophies in a comprehensive pedagogical approach to meet the needs of individual learners. This theoretical framework created a lens to understand the quality of the educational experience. The main methodology was the case study approach and it was weaved with the narrative inquiry. A triangulation process where multiple sources of data collection allowed for a deeper look at the eight teacher participants. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and review of artifacts and photographs. The qualitative research design captured rich experiences, provided meaningful information and deeper insight into various teaching practices and perspectives.

Highlights

Play is a holistic approach to learning as it engages mind, body, and spirit. It engages and energizes children. Play produces joy, freedom and satisfaction.

Educators reported they found play gave children many opportunities to problem-solve and explore areas of their own interest, use their imagination and think in creative ways.

FDK teacher's role was changing as partners in education, observers in the classroom, collaborators with colleagues, children, parents and the community.

The classroom as the third teacher shifted design as the layout of the classrooms, integrated the use of more natural materials, loose parts, and outdoor experiences.

Results

Summary of Data Findings

Category	Frequency	References
Program learning with activities	4	14
Role of teacher	6	6
Developmental child development	3	4
Role of student	7	4
Assessment	3	4
Management and learning	5	9
Challenges	3	2
Physical space in classroom	8	8
Problem-solving	3	2
Identity	4	2
Benefit of play	1	3
Natural sciences	4	2
Fun and learning	3	2
Themes and learning	2	1
Language	2	1

There are over 20 references to integrating learning with activities when examining the data. Teachers talked mostly about specific activities related to kindergarten learning quite often in their interviews. There were also many references to the role of the teacher in the classroom, and some importance given to social and interpersonal child development. There is also an awareness of the change in the role of the teacher shifting from a teacher-directed approach to a student-centred learning style and the all participants discussed the ECE and teacher partnership practices as an important component of a quality program. Less talk about specific literacy program, with a less formal printing, letter of the week, phonics lessons in FDK class.

Major Findings

Coded Data and Identified Key Themes

- Teaching Approaches
- Physical Space
- Integrated Curriculum
- Holistic Practices

What affected quality of FDK practices?

1. Integrating learning with activities - All eight participants adapted centre-based learning. Interactive, experiential and hands-on approach - 'Play as significant' (Play-based and Experiential Learning Opportunities)
2. Room layout, set-up, access, materials, variety of play – carpet area, floor space, the table top and counter designed and used for activities to engage the children, with quiet space and 'loud space' in mind. (Child-centred)
3. Inquiry-based learning, problem-solving and critical thinking opportunities by asking guided questions in learning process. Use of senses is important and welcomed the learning (Inquiry-Focus)
4. Whole-child focus. Focus on natural sciences. 'Looking at their perspective' and bringing a child's ideas into the classroom and more nature in learning (Environmental Education)

Discussion

Educators developed creative thinking practices and spaces in the 'wonder years; A peak period for creative self-expression occurs between the ages of 4 and 6 (Schirmacher, 1998). Educators found it was important to foster creativity in their classrooms by providing free-flow and plenty of time to access diverse materials. Block play was very important for developing visual-spatial awareness, perceptual-motor skills and the imagination. W. Haiget and P. Miller (1993) showed that pretend play allowed children to explore everyday situations and social roles and children the age of four were 'prolific pretenders' spending over twelve minutes per hour engaging in pretend play and spending more time in pretend play than solo play episodes. The data findings from participants in this study also confirmed the value of pretend play in the classroom. Children often created things or props using art materials that they would engage in pretend play. Participants found the use of the senses to guide the types of activities and he extend the learning while they deepened the thinking as the natural curiosities of the children led the inquiries and discoveries. Encouraging personal voice, self-expression, personal connections, originality, critical thinking activated creative energies. It was important to balance access and quality as the benefits of well-designed early childhood education programs enhanced academic and socio-emotional competencies.

Conclusions

Some Research Implications

- Improve quality by:
 - Interpret and Use of FDELKP curriculum approach
 - Reducing class size would improve quality of FDK
 - Improving teacher training & ongoing PD
 - Integrating five key elements
- EYE Model is integrated and comprehensive
 - Looking at broader domains, key areas and practices and good partnerships with new FDK in Ontario
 - Play-based, inquiry-focus, experiential learning, child-centred, environmental education
 - Nurture and manage the ECE and teacher role
- Aim to Nurture Individual Identity:
 - Culture / Spirituality / Race / Gender
 - Learning Styles / Differentiated Practices
 - EYE Model – Integrates domains, practice and partnerships

Future Research

- How much does the quality of the program depend upon the ECE and teacher partnership?
- What are better ways to study FDK policy short term or long term effects and impacts?
- Compare different school districts, demographic areas and different socio-economic populations
- Broaden the research by conducting various comparative studies between cities, regions, and / or provinces; more qualitative longitudinal studies
- Impact on students / benefits of FDK / parents perspectives, look at areas for teachers' training,

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