

Connecting the Dots: Early years as the starting point in the ‘continuum of learning’

“The education of children – from early childhood to Grade 12 needs to be nimble and adjust. The children of today will have a multitude of jobs and will learn to be “renaissance” people rather than the specialists of the current adult generations. They will also function in a new, better social system, hopefully free of racism and prejudice. They need to be exposed to that in the way they learn from their earliest entry into educational systems – that is from early learning and child care. This is the best time to start cultivating the competencies and principles that will serve them as adults – and will be enhanced at each step of the K-12 education.”

Magdalena Janus, Professor Psychiatry & Behavioural Neurosciences,
McMaster University

Why early learning matters to all learning

The world is changing rapidly and facing challenges that require us to engage the minds and efforts of our entire pool of human talent — from our youngest learners to lifelong learners. In Canada, our efforts are dedicated to helping our education systems evolve so that they are grounded in the skills- and competency-based learning and assessment practices necessary to eliminate the social, racial, economic, and geographic barriers that undermine the ability of all learners to reach their full potential.

Currently however, funding levers, policies, and curriculum goals are vaguely and inconsistently articulated between all the “layers” of our systems. To be successful, we will need the full commitment of all governments – provincial, territorial, and federal – to building seamless

education policy and funding architecture that supports a true Continuum of Learning – where policy, funding, and learning goals support continuity from early learning and childcare through to postsecondary education.

In this way we will be able to promote lifelong learning and set the stage for shared and sustainable prosperity.

“**The main challenge of education right now, in general, is that the job market – or the way adults become gainfully employed so that they can prosper and bring up families of their own – is very different than what it was in the 20th Century. Educational curricula, systems such as schools and universities, have been built on premises that appear to be no longer functioning the same way. There will still be doctors, and lawyers, and engineers, but most other jobs will require very flexible skills.**”

Magdalena Janus

Early childhood education is not simply an adjunct to the “real” education system. It is the basis upon which all future learning rests.

The right to an education, beginning with access to high-quality early learning opportunities, is entrenched in numerous international conventions endorsed by the government in Canada. As People for Education notes in its work on promoting a [rights based approach to education](#) in Canada, the right to education including the right to early learning is entrenched in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Early childhood education’s contributions to the long-term success of learners are numerous and well-documented (McCain, 2020). Children in preschool or quality childcare are better prepared for kindergarten, elementary, and secondary school. They develop important skills for the future, such as critical and creative thinking, curiosity, collaboration, and communications skills – what employers call vital transferable skills (Bertrand & McCuaig, 2019). Quality early learning and childcare programs also foster children’s executive functioning skills, which can reduce differences across socio demographic boundaries (the consequences of racialization and poverty) in academic achievement and emotional wellbeing (Galindo, 2018).

What kind of future do we want to build?

A national, publicly-funded, high-quality system of early learning is not only about achieving a particular international rank or position of competitiveness in today's global economy. It is about the kind of future we wish to build – one which both recognizes and capitalizes on technological and other innovations that help us make more efficient use of natural resources, and develops a fully-engaged citizenry that is capable and compassionate, each contributing to an equitable future.

This is often referred to as the promise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). According to the [World Economic Forum](#), the 4IR represents:

...a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another. It is a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances commensurate with those of the first, second and third industrial revolutions. These advances are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds...

Many proponents of the 4IR emphasize the hope this next phase holds for both green and equitable growth with the strategic use of technology to lessen inequality, grow smarter and waste less. However, others refer to the notion of the “[Next Economy](#)” to recognize that a transition is necessary, but stop short of prescribing its character. The notion of the “Next Economy” sees that the direction we choose as a planet and a people must be defined and shaped by human intervention, rather than some invisible, global economic force to which we must simply respond. The Next Economy is characterized by values such as interdependence, abundance, and regeneration; it emphasizes discovering, building, and supporting what is feasible, scalable and replicable, while staying rooted in the needs and interests of local communities.

“**The most effective way to acquire the skills demanded by the changing nature of work is to start early. Early investments in nutrition, health, social protection, and education lay strong foundations for the future acquisition of cognitive and socio-behavioral skills. They also make future skills acquisition more resilient to uncertainty. Prioritizing these investments could pay off significantly for economies, as long as both access and quality are highlighted.**”

World Bank 2019

Regardless of what we call this next phase of human social and economic development, Canada needs its population to possess the competencies, knowledge and skills required to solve a host of complex problems, including: eliminating social inequalities and advancing reconciliation between Canada and Indigenous peoples; prioritizing and adopting sustainable methods of producing, living, and consuming; decreasing polarization, all to ensure that Canada can be a fair, prosperous, and sustainable society.

The current commitment to early learning and childcare

The key competencies, knowledge, and skills associated with the next phase of our social and economic development – the ability to communicate, collaborate, self-advocate, self-regulate, and problem-solve – are set on a trajectory early in life. In fact, several provincial and territorial systems have developed their early education systems on the premise that [play-based learning](#) (the precursor to “experiential learning”) provides rich learning opportunities through child-led and open-ended activities. It nurtures children’s social, numeracy, and literacy skills. Taking initiative, focused attention, and curiosity are all part of learning and play. This bundle of competencies, knowledge and skills – whether referred to as ‘global competencies’ or ‘executive functions’ – are the building blocks of success.

The evolution required if Canada is to develop a true Continuum of Learning begins with understanding the gaps and challenges with the current policy approaches to early childhood education in Canada. Although education systems across the country share an aspiration to building a competency-based education system, the same does not exist with regional systems of early learning. The *Atkinson Centre’s 2020 Early Childhood Education Report* highlights significant disparities in funding and access to early years services on a regional basis in Canada.

The Centre uses a number of indicators to represent access to daycare opportunities and the value governments place on ECE (early childhood education) in its funding levels. In Quebec, 73% of two- to four-year-old children have a space in the system, and ECE workers receive a salary that is 66% of the average teacher’s salary. In Saskatchewan, only 27% of the same age group have access to a spot, and ECE workers receive 37% of an average teacher’s salary (Atkinson, 2020). Childcare Canada notes that parent fees for children 1.5 to 2.5 years old ranged from a low in Quebec

City of \$179 per month, to a high in Toronto of \$1,774 per month. These gaps in funding and access need to be eliminated if Canada is to better prepare today's children – all of its children – for tomorrow's future.

Commitment to ECE must involve a public conversation about a more elaborate, robust role for the federal government in coordinating and funding a seamless continuum of learning..

The federal budget released in April 2021 suggests such a future is on the horizon. Although all domains of education are in provincial purview as prescribed in Section 93 of the 1867 *British North America Act*, the federal government announced it will provide \$30 billion over five years to support expanded access to quality early learning opportunities and to reduce user fees for families. Recent agreements with British Columbia and Nova Scotia which focus on quality, non-profit childcare, and increased supports for early childhood educators are a promising sign. According to the **McCain Foundation's analysis**, this represents a move “away from the current market approach to a view of early learning and child care as a public good.”

“**A robust early learning and child care system that is aligned with provincial/territorial public education would address immediate needs of building back better after the pandemic, including ensuring women's return to work. Increased parental labour participation now and in the future is essential to Canada's economy and productivity. Universal access to early learning and child care that is part of public education is non-stigmatizing and based on the rights of children, regardless of parents' workforce status. Long-term benefits are tied to the learning and well-being benefits from quality ECE.**”

Jane Bertrand Adjunct Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

People for Education and the Continuum of Learning Initiative

People for Education is leading a Canadian cross-sector dialogue, the Future of Public Education Initiative, to support change in public education — to enable all learners to graduate with the competencies, knowledge, and skills they require regardless of their path in adulthood.

A key component of this work is the Continuum of Learning Initiative – a collaborative effort to examine the educational outcomes needed from early childhood education through to K-12 (and beyond), and provide policy recommendations to support a more seamless and strategic approach to funding, and defining the goals for that continuum.

The initiative’s aim is to synthesize evidence to understand what policies and practices will be required to prepare students to thrive; and what is needed to support educators so that they can lead and respond to changes in the education system that relate to cross-continuum skills and competency development. Preliminary research has revealed that a continuum of learning that starts with early learning and childcare and continues into K-12 is currently broken (Pascal, 2009). Young people are not adequately prepared for the future, in part, due to the barriers across education systems and sectors.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated cracks in our education systems, and now, more than ever, it is time to break down the barriers to ensure that all children have the competencies, knowledge, and skills they need to thrive, both in school and in life.

Investment in early learning pays dividends

Early childhood education is the necessary starting point for a Continuum of Learning, with numerous benefits for children and families.

Researchers have tracked students from early childhood to adulthood and found that students’ social-emotional and creativity competencies at school entry were strong predictors of success up to 16 years later. Of note, these competencies had a stronger relationship to student outcomes at the age of 22 than their Grade 1 marks (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, 2005, p. 1467). Participation in early childhood education and learning opportunities can also help improve learners’ long-term health outcomes (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 1998).

Between two and five years old, children develop skills in language, thinking, and well-being, which lead to developing creativity, complex problem-solving, and cognitive flexibility (McCain, 2020). Participating in early learning and childcare as early as age three can improve language, literacy, and math skills for children from low-income homes (Ansari, Pianta,

Whittaker, Vitiello & Ruzek, 2019). All of these skills can develop and strengthen into the key skills for success in the 21st century.

Social benefits—Reducing inequities

While early childhood education has clear cognitive and developmental benefits, it also has clear social benefits.

Early learning opportunities have been found to help eliminate the gaps caused by poverty and inequality. Children who at age five are already vulnerable due to socio-demographic factors, may struggle with developing key skills and competencies as they continue through the education system. Instead of starting off their education on equal footing with their peers, they begin with a gap that continues to widen over the years (Galindo, 2018).

This does not have to be the case. Galindo's (2018, p.1) study found that "attendance in early childhood education programs can generate positive outcomes, such as increases in school readiness and reading proficiency, especially [in children] from disadvantaged backgrounds." The study revealed that children who did not attend center-based care performed lower on math and reading assessments than those who did. Similarly, Byrne (2016) found that participating in after-school childcare supports children's educational needs, particularly those with limited family support, and is "strongly associated with maternal employment and high household income" (p. 543).

Early learning and childcare provide a range of benefits to children and to society, including allowing more caregivers, mostly women, to enter the workforce and to participate fully in the economic and social lives of their societies and eliminating poverty (Alexander, Beckman, MacDonald, Renner & Stewart, Conference Board of Canada, 2017).

“Whether the focus is on the need for a creative, inquiring and resilient citizenry, equity of opportunity and poverty reduction, the early identification and intervention of mental health issues or a flexible all-hands on deck workforce, there is simply no better nation-building investment than universal, non-profit, accessible and developmentally rich early childhood education and care.”

Charles Pascal, Professor of Applied Psychology & Human Development at OISE/University of Toronto

Despite the evidence in support of early learning, researchers have identified that a lack of alignment between early learning and instruction in the early primary grades means that “gains achieved in early childhood are reduced or eliminated over time” (McCain, 2020, p.33). To prevent the issue of “fade out,” elementary education needs to build on the skills and competencies children learn in the early years, as there are long-term implications for success into K-12 and early adulthood (McCain, 2020).

By looking at learning as a continuum from birth, we forge a continuous path in education that begins in early childhood and continues seamlessly through Kindergarten to Grade 12.

The Impact of COVID-19 on early learning and childcare in Ontario schools

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 and childcare centres closed, parents and caregivers were often still required to either work from home or perform essential frontline services. Children were pulled away from their regular learning routines leading to uncertainty and stress for everyone.

When childcare centres were eventually able to re-open, they continued to face the same challenges as before (cost and availability), plus they had to implement health and safety measures, limit groups of children to smaller cohorts, and manage the impacts of sudden prolonged closures.

To capture the impact of the pandemic on early learning and childcare, People for Education’s Annual Ontario School Survey asked principals about the policies and processes in place for space-sharing between school and childcare. More than 1,000 principals participated in the 2020-2021 Survey and their responses reveal that the future needs of Ontario students will not be met in the current system or with present-day policy thinking.

The biggest challenge for childcare in schools

Over the last decades, schools have played an increasingly major role in providing access to childcare in their communities – offering a straight-forward transition from school to childcare. In 2014-15, 70% of elementary schools reported some form of childcare on school grounds. In 2019-20, that number grew to 81% and dipped slightly to 77% in 2020-21 (during COVID).

Childcare in schools comes with its own set of challenges – the biggest of which is, and has always been, space. These challenges were exacerbated by COVID-19, mainly due to the cleaning and disinfecting requirements, especially where space is shared between childcare and Kindergarten. In the Annual Ontario School Survey, of the schools that reported childcare within the school facilities, 63% had a designated separate space for childcare. In terms of space-sharing with other classes, 29% had a designated space inside a classroom *only* used by childcare. Almost two-thirds of principals reported that additional time was needed for disinfecting that shared space.

Schools have come up with creative solutions to collaborate with, and incorporate, childcare into their schools, but the challenge of inequitable access to childcare remains. In 2020-21, 84% of elementary schools with the top 10% in average family incomes had childcare, compared to 66% of schools with the lowest average family incomes. In 2020-2021, one in four schools still report *no* access to childcare, and principals report that cost and availability continue to pose limitations for some communities.

Canada's shifting perspectives on early learning

Currently, early learning and care policies are often developed separately from K-12 education policy in Canada. Responsibility lies with different ministries (or different areas of the Ministry with no obligatory policy development co-ordination) and various levels of government (i.e. federal, provincial and municipal). Aside from the pandemic has affected early learning and childcare services, the pre-existing policy architecture is an enormous challenge to creating a seamless Continuum of Learning.

However, the announcement made in the federal government's budget speech in April 2021 was significant. It declared its investment as part of a larger plan intended "to build a recovery [from COVID] that gives all women in Canada the ability to fully participate in our economy" (Budget 2021: A Recovery plan for jobs, growth and resilience, p. 96). Also, the federal policy frames early childhood education as a necessity.

A variety of policy approaches have been undertaken across Canada and internationally with respect to early learning and childcare:

Canada’s Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2017), states, “the early years of life are critical in the development and future well-being of the child and continuum of learning.” (n.p.) The framework supports a commitment from governments to work towards investments to enhance quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusivity in early learning and childcare.

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2018) focuses on the provision of “high-quality, culturally rooted early learning and childcare programming” (n.p.) for all Indigenous children in Canada. Correspondingly, the key principles of this framework are:

- Indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultures
- First Nations, Inuit, and Métis determination
- Quality programs and services
- Child and family-centeredness
- Inclusivity
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Accessibility
- Transparency and accountability
- Respect, collaboration, and partnerships

To assure the acknowledgement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples across Canada, the framework declares its support for distinct frameworks for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis visions, goals, and priorities. Collaboration and relationship-building are key aspects of the Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework overall.

“As the child grows and develops into a capable person, it is critical that Indigenous education values, beliefs, and ways of knowing have space in the early years dialogue. Educators need to pay attention to and practice wakefulness in integrating culturally relevant approaches as they relate to the early years.”
Angela James, [Becoming a Capable Child](#)

Other models — How a continuum of learning can work

Models from across Canada and European countries provide examples of how a continuum of learning starting in the early years can be established with the policies and programs that bridge early learning and childcare with K-12 (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Examples from National and International Jurisdictions on the Continuum of Learning

Jurisdiction	Policy/Program	Description
Norway	The Kindergarten Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under the national Ministry of Education and Research, Norwegian Early Learning and Childcare is overseen by the Directorate of Education and Training, which also holds responsibility for primary, secondary, and vocational education. The Kindergarten Act regulates the Norwegian Early Learning and Childcare sector as a whole for children between the ages of 0-5 and mandates the transition between kindergarten and primary school. Curricula between Kindergarten and primary school are linked in content, pedagogy, and values.
Finland	Finnish national policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early learning and childcare is part of the provision of holistic care, education, and family support in Finland. Early learning and childcare is a parental choice (as in Canada), and is funded through government allowances—regardless of choice—with possible additional local governmental supplemental funding for parents/families. Early learning and childcare provision, programmatic design, and funding is written into national policy.
Sweden	Swedish Education Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 1996, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science gained responsibility for Early Learning and Childcare, with the purpose of building on “the close pedagogical links between the pre-school, school and leisure-time centres”. Since then, the National Agency for Education has taken over responsibility for Early Learning and Childcare and the Early Learning and Childcare has been included in the Swedish Education Act, which contains legislation for the continuum of learning from preschool through to adult education.
Quebec (provincial)	Québec Education Program (QEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The QEP starts in preschool (ages 4 to 5) and extends to elementary and secondary school. The QEP comprises a set of competencies that students are expected to gain as they progress through their learning. There is an emphasis on “learnings specific to early childhood development” which includes communication, performing sensorimotor actions and completing a project/activity.

Preparing for our future now — Creating a seamless continuum of learning for all

All young people in Canada need to develop the skills and competencies that will equip them to succeed and thrive in a rapidly-changing world. This is the route to long sought after equitable outcomes in education, and it begins in the early years.

Early childhood education is the basis upon which all future learning rests. However, policy and practices that are the focus of early learning in most Canadian jurisdictions often “fade out” when children enter elementary school due to a lack of continuity and common goals through all the stages of our education systems. The lack of alignment between early years education and K-12 is mirrored further down the continuum where post-secondary institutions have different goals and outcome measures than K-12. Similarly, organizations working on future-ready skills have not been able to cross the chasm between adult needs and childhood policy and programs.

To bridge these gaps, Canada needs to ‘connect the dots’ across education systems to promote a continuum of learning starting in the early years to K-12, and beyond. Early learning and childcare must be publicly funded, publicly governed, and embedded in our public education systems. People for Education’s Continuum of Learning initiative will begin a dialogue on the numerous benefits of early learning and childcare so that *all* students are set up to both succeed and engage fully in our unchartered social and economic futures.

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