

Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten Programs: Analysis of Curriculum Documents in Four Canadian Provinces

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This summative report examines the role of play-based learning in Kindergarten programs in four provinces – Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan. Through a detailed review and analysis of official Kindergarten documents produced by the Ministry of Education of each province, emerging themes related to play-based learning were identified. The table below shows

Number of Provincial Documents Reviewed

| Province | Number of documents |
|--------------|---------------------|
| Alberta | 4 |
| Manitoba | 6 |
| Ontario | 7 |
| Saskatchewan | 2 |

the number of official documents reviewed from each province.

An analysis of these documents revealed several themes:

- Role and benefits of play
- Characteristics and types of play-based learning
- Role of teachers in play-based learning
- Role of parents in play-based learning

This report presents a synthesis and integration of the key themes gathered from those documents. The goal in reporting these themes is to provide a

better understanding of the role and benefits of play-based learning across the four provinces.

Role and Benefits of Play

The Kindergarten documents across all four provinces support an intentional play-based approach. One of the main goals of the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten (FDEL-K) program in Ontario is to “provide a play-based learning environment” and “a play-based curriculum to promote engagement with learning and self-regulation in young children” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 5). Manitoba’s Kindergarten programs aim to offer children “a joyful introduction to school through intentional play-based and developmentally appropriate learning experiences” in an “environment where play is encouraged and nurtured” (Manitoba Education, 2013, p. 27). The Saskatchewan Kindergarten curriculum (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009) also recognizes the need for “an environment that facilitates play, exploration and discovery” and “inquiry through play” (p. 9). Although the role of play-based learning in Alberta is not as pronounced as in the other provinces, purposeful play is nevertheless recognized as “an important mode of learning for children” in the guiding principles of the Kindergarten Program Statement (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 5).

The strong emphasis on play in the Kindergarten programs across the four provinces is supported by the recognition of the value of play for

children's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. The Ontario FDEL-K Program evaluation reports (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012a) document the positive outcomes of play-based learning in many different areas of children's learning such as literacy, numeracy, science and technology, health and physical activity, problem solving, and the arts. The potential for play-based learning to make children more "knowledgeable, confident, and creative lifelong learners" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 2) is enormous because it encourages them to "interact, imagine, experiment and explore to add to their knowledge, learn new skills and practice what they have learned" (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 1). Through purposeful play, children are also enabled to "explore ideas and possibilities, engage in divergent thinking, and to reflect on their learning" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3).

Characteristics and Types of Play-Based Learning

In Manitoba's Kindergarten guidelines (Manitoba Education, 2013), a "truly play-based program" (p. 25) is described as a program where children participate in a balance of adult-guided and child-initiated activities in an environment that encourages and nurtures play. Adult-guided and child-initiated play are two of the many different types of play provided as examples of play-based learning in the Kindergarten documents across the four provinces. Typically guided play or purposeful play is defined as teacher-initiated and planned, while open-ended, unstructured, self-directed or free play is referred to as child initiated, guided and directed. The Ontario FDEL-K documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b) advocate the need for both child-initiated free play that allows children to be "in charge of their play," and adult-guided "structured play-based learning opportunities" (p. 14). Apart from child- and teacher-initiated play, play-based learning also includes group play or cooperative play, where children learn to explore their environment and play together. Knowing how to play with others in a respectful and caring way is

a learning expectation of children in Alberta's Kindergarten programs (Alberta Education, 2013). Some other types of play are dramatic play, joyful play, imaginative play and pretend play, which all let children play with an element of pretend or imagination in their "fantasy worlds of castles, forests, offices, outer space, kitchens, [or] ships" (Manitoba Education, 2008, p. 33).

To facilitate play-based learning and to meet the goals and standards of the Ministerial Order on Student Learning (as cited in Alberta Education, 2013), Kindergarten programs in Alberta are required to provide a 'learning commons' where children can play. The learning commons is "an inclusive, flexible, learner-centred, physical and/or virtual space for collaboration, inquiry, imagination and play to expand and deepen learning" (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 21). Similarly, in Manitoba, Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to set up "imaginative centres" (Manitoba Education, 2014, no page) organized around different themes in the classroom. Ontario Kindergarten guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b) also require all its FDEL-K programs to create play and puppet centres in the classroom, and to provide adequate space and resources to support play-based learning both outdoors and indoors. Likewise, Kindergarten authorities in Saskatchewan are strongly recommended to provide "the environment for children to design, play, wonder, and explore the world around them" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6).

Role of Teachers in Play-Based Learning

Teachers play a very important role in play-based learning. With the teacher's support, children's play "becomes more elaborate, richer, and more complex" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p.10). Ontario's FDEL-K programs require teachers to set aside daily blocks of time for children to engage in a balance of individual, small-group, and whole-group play experiences. The concept of intentional play-based teaching is strongly advocated by the FDEL-K guidelines, which ask teachers to "take advantage of play and embed intentional opportunities for learning in ... play activities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 7). In the same way, Manitoba's

Kindergarten programs strive to achieve the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)'s recommendation that teachers use "intentional teaching" and be "deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments" (Manitoba Education, 2013, p. 19).

Opportunities for children to learn through play can be created when Kindergarten teachers plan lessons with concrete materials and hands-on experiences (Manitoba Education, 2014). They should also be willing to make changes to their regular activities and materials according to the needs and interests of the children (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). When teachers learn about children's interests, abilities and developmental progresses by continually observing their play and interactions with the physical environment (Manitoba Education, 2013), they will be in a better position to assist with and extend their play activities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Saskatchewan Kindergarten policies urge teachers to "observe, document, and interpret the inquiry and learning that is taking place through play" recognizing that "through play, children show what they know, understand, and are able to do" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 7-8). Teachers are advised to invite parents into the classroom to observe their children's play, so they might provide parents with ideas to incorporate play-based learning at home (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012a).

Role of Parents in Play-Based Learning

Parents play an integral part in play-based learning. They can extend play opportunities for their children by setting up and joining in a regular playtime with them. During this playtime, they can carry out activities together such as singing songs, playing with language, making up new words, stories, rhymes, riddles and skits, and using old clothes for dress-up time and imaginative play (Manitoba Education, 2002). Parents can also support the implementation of play-based learning in the classroom by communicating with teachers and offering any important information about their children's learning that can help teachers meet the children's

individual needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

Conclusion

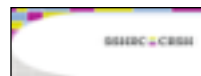
In conclusion, play has an authentic and important place in the Kindergarten programs across all four provinces. Most of the documents reviewed for this report recognized play as a vehicle for learning that is vitally important for the healthy development of children. Thus, all Kindergarten programs are encouraged to create opportunities for children and offer them choices in such ways that will fire their imaginations because when "children are playing, children are learning" (Manitoba Education, 2013, p. 19).

Author Biography

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Acknowledgements

The *Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play* Project is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



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