

Play in Early Childhood Education Programs: Analysis of Curriculum Documents in Four Canadian Provinces

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This summative report is generated from the review and analysis of the curriculum documents for early childhood education (ECE) programs from the Ministry of Education websites of four Canadian provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan. Across these provincial documents, play is considered to be essential for young children's positive development and learning. As partners of children and their families, educators play a critical role in supporting children's healthy and holistic learning.

The Process Of Document Analysis

All the existing curriculum documents on the Ministry of Education websites for ECE programs were reviewed and analyzed. The following table summarizes the number of documents reviewed from each province:

Number of Provincial Documents Reviewed

Province	Number of documents
Alberta	0
Manitoba	3
Ontario	3
Saskatchewan	15

Using 'play' as a descriptor, play-related descriptions from each document were located and marked. These descriptions were read several

times and common play-themes were noted. The play-descriptions from each document were grouped together under these themes. As each theme was read again and summarized, the original curriculum documents were referenced whenever further information or clarification was needed. During this process, the descriptions grouped in the 'role of educator' theme were further divided into four distinct sub-categories.

An analysis of the curriculum documents from Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan revealed the following themes:

- Characteristics of play-based learning
- The roles of educators in play-based learning
 - Fostering positive relationships in children
 - Co-constructing knowledge and scaffolding
 - Being reflective practitioners
 - Partnering with families
- The roles of parents in play-based learning
- Levels of social play and types of play

Characteristics of Play-Based Learning

The positive relationship between play and learning in children's development is prominent in the documents from all three provinces, for example, "Children learn best through play" (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011, p. 6) and through play, "[i]deas and skills become meaningful; tools for learning are practised; and concepts are understood" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 15). Besides, play, exploration, and discovery are vital processes in

enhancing children's holistic development (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009b).

The ECE documents from all three provinces endorse play-based learning and include various benefits from this pedagogical approach. Play offers many opportunities for children to engage in conversation and to share their ideas with adults and peers, which nurtures their language development, relationship-building, and problem-solving skills (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013a). Through play, children also develop self-regulation, empathy, independence, imagination, and creativity (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011). Moreover, "by using and creating environmental print in children's pretend play, children begin to understand what reading is and how print works" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 17) and start to develop numerical thinking when they recognize quantity differences and the relationships between large and small and more and less (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Since the nature of play is 'child-directed' or 'child-centred,' play fosters positive attitudes toward learning and self-confidence as children's learning is driven by their own motivations rather than educators' dictated or prescribed guides (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008a; 2008b).

The Roles of Educators in Play-Based Learning

Ontario's Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007, stresses the need for early childhood educators (ECEs) to plan and deliver inclusive play-based learning and care programs to promote the well-being and holistic development of children (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). The roles of educators are fundamental to play-based programs and they are pronounced in documents across the three provinces.

Fostering Positive Relationships With Children

One of the most important roles for educators is to develop a positive relationship with the

children in their care. "For children to learn and develop, they must feel safe and secure by developing a sense of trust in everyone who cares for them" (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011, p. 11). In order for educators to foster positive relationship with children, their use of positive language and logical reasoning is crucial (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011). When educators care about and respect children, and recognize their strengths and abilities, children build positive self-identities (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b). Furthermore, empathy is nurtured when children share experiences, relate to and respect each other alongside caring, secure relationships with adults (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Co-constructing Knowledge and Scaffolding

Educators are children's partners in their learning process. They "participate in play, guiding children's planning, decision-making and communication, and extending children's explorations with narrative, novelty and challenges" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 20). Educators encourage children's capacity for choice by inviting them to play (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008a) and contribute to the play by modelling oral language and emergent literacy skills (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b). Educators can organize an environment that scaffolds children's learning (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008a), and can make comments and ask open-ended questions in order to "stretch children's thinking and understanding about themselves and about the world" (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011, p. 12).

Being Reflective Practitioners

Educators' reflections on children's prior engagement in various activities is vital in curriculum planning and implementation. "A child-centred curriculum includes a combination of child-initiated spontaneous play and planned activities designed around children's interests and needs" (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011, p. 16). In order for educators to plan activities that

enhance children's learning, educators' observations and documentations are indispensable. The *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b) highlights that "observations are used to review processes, reflect on and analyze children's learning and as a foundation for program planning" (p. 15). A framework for Ontario early childhood settings, *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) similarly states "[e]arly childhood practitioners require a working environment that provides time for program planning, observation and documentation, opportunities for professional development and regular conversations with families" (p. 20). By being reflective, educators facilitate and optimize children's learning and development in play-based programs.

Partnering with Families

Educators are strongly encouraged to work closely with families. "In quality early learning programs, educators honour the families' role as children's first teachers and collaborate with them to provide consistent support and culturally sensitive learning opportunities" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b, p. 18). Educators are expected to "communicate with parents about their child's learning, including the interests, abilities and needs they have observed during the children's play" (Manitoba Child Care Program, 2011, p. 17) and "seek out opportunities to support interactions between young children and their parents and other caregivers that build on the child's interests and skills" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 19). *Early Years Evaluation (EYE): A Guide for Teachers to Engage Families* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.) encourages educators to share examples of a child's play-based learning or portfolio – e.g. photos of the child engaged in play, items created by the child – while discussing children's learning and development with families.

The Roles of Parents

The importance of parents' understanding of play-based learning is articulated in the Ontario

and Saskatchewan documents, for example, "Parents [also] understand that play is valuable to development, allowing children to construct, challenge, and expand their understanding of the world around them" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a, p.14). In order for parents to support play-based learning at home, they can spend time with their children every day playing together and they can provide play opportunities with other children (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.). More specifically, parents can be encouraged to help their children organize play materials on low shelves or in bins or boxes, and change them occasionally so they can keep stimulating their children's curiosity and interest (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Levels of Social Play and Types of Play

Only in one Saskatchewan document was there information about the levels of social play and types of play. Drawing from Parten's (1932) observations on children's social behaviour during play, *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b) informs that while "children's play ranges from physical play with objects such as baby rattles to more complex cognitive play in games with many rules such as cards or chess" (p. 25), the levels of children's participation in social play can be seen as solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative, and a child's passive play behaviour as uninvolved and onlooker. Two types of play are also categorized as cognitive play and socio-dramatic play (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008b).

Conclusion

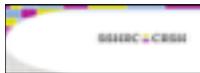
In sum, across the three provincial documents, play is regarded as the best means of children's learning and development. In ECE programs, educators are encouraged to stimulate and scaffold children's play and learning based on their observations and documentations. Working in partnership, educators and families can together enrich children's learning through play and optimize children's holistic development.

Author Biography

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