

Full-day kindergarten—the best of what we imagined is happening in classrooms

March 6 2019, by Charles E. Pascal



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The classroom is bright with enough room for 26 kindergarten kids to move around their stations of discovery. A girl plays with water, pouring too much from a big container into a smaller one, watching the overflow, trying again. It's easy to imagine her 30 years later in her post-doc science lab.

Another child wanders around, spinning wildly. ADHD? Possibly. I watch Michelle, the early childhood educator, firmly attend to him with hand gently on his shoulder. Her low tones are almost a whisper. Her calmness becomes his as she moves with him toward a small group at a station of play, where he joins. Magical.

The sounds and sights provide a cornucopia of emotions for me. I am seeing the living, breathing representation of what we mean by quality practice.

It's now nine years since full-day kindergarten was implemented in 2010, after we submitted our 2009 report, ["With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario."](#)

As a former early learning advisor to Ontario's premier, I continue to receive many invitations to visit full-day kindergarten settings. I often feel I am bombarded with experiences that take the script of our report and make it a live performance of the best of what we imagined.

Our report was based on over 20,000 submissions from organizations, experts, individuals, 83 community roundtables and the best research from around the world.

With further input on various models of delivery, then-Premier Dalton McGuinty accepted our key recommendations.

The model includes having a team with an early childhood educator and certified teacher lead each class. Together they apply a curiosity-driven, play-based pedagogy. It has shown [major results when it comes to children's social, emotional and cognitive development](#). Scholars continue to track the [economic return from high-quality early education](#).

And more and more children are showing up in first grade with

increased readiness for formal education. Over 93 per cent of eligible families have participated in this non-compulsory program.

Full-day kindergarten is an example of evidence-based policy making—sadly, an all-too-rare phenomenon. Recently, the current Ontario government has publicly mused about eliminating full-day kindergarten. With huge push back from parents, educators and other experts, [they backed off within a week](#).

But the Minister of Education continues to contemplate alternative models of delivery driven by anything but evidence, ignoring nine years of experience and ongoing research about the benefits accruing to the more than 250,000 children enrolled each year.

The children follow their natural curiosity

Back in the classroom, individual and small group activity morph into a circle of participation around words and meaning under Linda's guidance. Linda is the certified teacher.

Later, the lights are dimmed, and without anything said, the children gather back in a larger circle for mindfulness work—meditative yoga.

Even the overly energetic boy is doing his best, with helpful guidance from Michelle, to get closer to real calm.

Throughout the day, children follow their natural curiosity and their natural interests, but it would be inaccurate to characterize this as a do-your-own-thing environment. I observe the skillful and intentional guidance Michelle and Linda provide as they pose questions to, or answer questions from, a child or group.

If I hadn't been introduced to Linda or Michelle and told who was the

certified teacher and who was the early childhood educator, I would not have known. Each interacts with the 26 children in a seamless and rotating one-to-13 ratio.

If their pay stubs were handy, I could tell: the early childhood educator makes less money. Yet it's important to note that registered early childhood educators in full-day kindergarten are paid relatively better than their peers in other settings because of union representation. [Proper pay equals attracting and retaining high-quality educators equals better outcomes for children.](#)

When I observe these equal partners contributing their respective gifts, it is clear that together something is created that is larger than the sum of their experience and training in support of their charges' development.

I asked Linda and Michelle to explain what I observed. Michelle noted: "I bring my specialized knowledge of child development and skills of child observation and documentation to the process of tracking the children's progress. This allows me to identify where each child is at in their learning journey. Then I plan for each student's next steps and further growth in learning."

Linda, as a certified teacher, is responsible for writing the final draft of each child's progress report, creating and implementing students' individual education plans and managing the students' records. As a member of the Ontario College of Teachers, Linda follows the [professional learning framework.](#)

Linda says: "My teaching degree focused on students in the primary and junior divisions. My skills include a strong knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and effective instructional, assessment practices and long-term planning. That includes working with teachers who will receive the full-day students in the primary grades to ensure good

transitions."

This last part is critical to the longer-term development of the entire education continuum.

Parent-home collaboration

Research is also clear [about the important impact of the home environment](#). So, the training of highly skilled early education teams in effectively developing truly collaborative, genuinely reciprocal relationships with parents and guardians is key to child outcomes.

Back in the classroom, when it's time for child pick-up, I listen in on the brief exchanges between Michelle, Linda and the parents.

I pay particular attention to an exchange between Michelle and the mother of the whirling boy. Important comments about his progress on his self-regulation journey are exchanged. I see gentle coaching at its best. Shaping kids, saving kids.

Ontario's full-day kindergarten model, ever-improving based on ongoing research and evaluation, is working. But as the saying goes, truth is the first casualty of war. Are we witnessing a battle between fact and fiction? Time will tell if Ontario's current government implements a false economic decision based on ideology rather than evidence.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Full-day kindergarten—the best of what we imagined is happening in classrooms (2019,

March 6) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-full-day-kindergartenthe-classrooms.html>

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