

Early Learning

and Early Childhood Education



An Accord by the
Association of Canadian Deans of Education
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ACDE's Accord on
Early Learning
and Early Childhood Education

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Section 1: Context and Purpose for the Accord

A major shift has occurred over the past 50 years in the discourse relating to the care and education of young children. From a focus on childcare as a “women’s issue” relative to workforce engagement, there is now a focus on early children education with its own pedagogical discourse on child development and learning (Flanagan, 2012).

The purposes of early years education and care are framed in multiple and even contradictory ways. For some, investment in the early years is seen in terms of enhancing human capital (i.e., enhancing future society capital by reducing poverty, health issues, and other social burdens), as well as preparing children for school success and productive citizenship. Others emphasize the importance of the early years as an aspect of a democratic society, where education is seen as a basic right and where early learning spaces are conceived as a “meeting place.” For example, John Dewey (1902) imagined early learning settings as places for the creation of a community of inquiry where adults and children actively “research” the world, co-constructing knowledge and understandings together.

From this contentious context has emerged a public discussion about the purposes and forms of early years care and education. Policy makers and the public are becoming more aware of the importance of the early learning years in shaping the quality of children’s lives both in school and beyond. While this recognition appears to be widespread, nevertheless the quality and availability of early learning opportunities still vary considerably across Canada.

This Accord by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) seeks to address the uneven provision of quality early learning experiences by highlighting practices that focus on the learning and care of all children; promoting improved, better connected education for preschool and elementary children; and recognizing educator knowledge as vital to effective education for early learners and their families. ACDE's *General Accord* (2006) created a framework for its signatories to work together to advance the public good in Canada through education. The *Accord on Early Learning*, as one of ACDE's family of Accords, represents a commitment among members to advancing a set of shared goals and principles pertaining to this topic.

In 1987 when a national Child Care Act was first proposed in Canada, rationales included concerns about an expanding [and largely female] and stable labour force, the need to accommodate children with special needs, and the importance of targeting funds to low income families. While a National Child Care Act has never been implemented, several key factors since then have helped to promote the integration of early care and early education. The care of children in their early years is no longer only a custodial function; it is now understood that learning programming for young children is an essential component of all responsible care of young children.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) recently released a document endorsing “play-based learning.” Citing psychological and neurological research, the Ministers of Education across Canada “endorse a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning, but [on the contrary] brings them together to promote creativity in future generations” (CMEC, 2012).

Recent steps toward the integration of childcare and early learning in Canada include the movement of aspects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) into the administrative auspices of formal education. These moves have been welcomed by advocacy groups. Including ECEC programs under the management of a ministry of education underlines the importance of early childhood and implies more stable funding for programs and services. In many cases early learning services are being decentralized to local and regional levels of government. As with integration, decentralization is generally viewed in a positive light, but government resources and support are necessary to avoid fragmentation and service gaps.

Split systems of care and learning still, however, remain the norm in many jurisdictions. Particularly in remote, rural, and northern Canada the issue of “choice” around the care and education of young children is moot. In some cases daycare or childcare operates without curricula, without well-educated staff, and without government standards or guidance. In other cases, playschools and kindergartens are integrated into the school system, with corresponding benefits such as highly developed curricular and pedagogical frameworks, well-qualified teachers specialized in early learning, and high levels of accountability to government ministries. The goals of “daycare,” and even of “quality baby-sitting,” and of early learning education, and of compulsory schooling are no longer separate, particularly if seen through the lens of a child-centred philosophy (Moss, 2011, 2008). Many jurisdictions in Canada are examining and moving towards an integrated approach to early learning and care.

Section 2: The Terrain of Early Learning and Early Childhood Education

*W*e may think of childhood as a carefree time of little responsibility: toys and games, wide-eyed innocence, a time of exploration, free of adult stresses and worries. Childhood as we romantically idealize it may, in fact, be a passing fancy, something that did not really exist until the eighteenth century and is, perhaps, slowly ceasing to exist today (Postman, 1983). If we are to preserve and value childhood in its own right, strong early childhood programs and early learning opportunities need to be developed and supported at all levels: in families and communities, preschools, schools, colleges, and universities.

A consensus exists among policy makers in member nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that providing “quality early experiences” (Neuman, 2008, p. 166) for children requires attention to both care and education services. However, less agreement exists about how systems for the care and education of young children should be organized. Neuman notes that “in the absence of strong governance, some parents end up piecing together different ECEC arrangements..., while others fall through the cracks” (p. 166). Until recently, many countries, including Canada, administered ECEC under divided auspices. The result has been fragmentation of responsibilities, as well as differences in standards and in levels of compensation for staff.

Some early learning educators work outside school systems and are prepared outside of universities. One- and two-year programs at community colleges, technical institutes, and private colleges offer early learning educators practical and pedagogical support for use in daycares and preschools. University programs may offer four-year B.Ed. degrees and post degree programs with a focus on early learning or kindergarten. Junior kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, or kindergarten are now offered in all Canadian provinces and in some cases, education and early learning ministries share the same provincial offices.

Influenced primarily by new studies in the sociology of childhood, educational thought about what childhood is and who children are has changed significantly (see James & Prout, 1997). In research and pedagogical contexts children are now considered social actors whose ways of thinking and knowing, as well as views and ideas, are valued and listened to (see for example the Mosaic Approach, the Reggio Emilia approach and adaptations, and Clark & Moss, 2001). This new understanding of childhood and children changes the ethical responsibility adults have towards children. In a move beyond traditional hierarchies and modern individualism, moral obligations are no longer about collectiveness or autonomy, but about otherness and response to otherness. Adults and children decentre and disrupt themselves through interacting openly with the meanings of others, creating or narrating an ever-expanding, more differently inclusive humanity (Wall, 2010).

The rise of socio-cultural perspectives in the study and theorizing of early learning education has transformed thinking about learning, teaching, and knowledge. For example, the mediating role of the adult (educator) is a central concept in the socio-cultural account of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The notion of “scaffolding,” first introduced by Bruner (1968) implies that learning occurs in social situations, through interactions in which a more knowledgeable member carefully assists the “less” knowledgeable member in

the construction of knowledge. Socio-cultural perspectives have had other implications for the education of young children, including exploring the relationships between learning in home and school settings and the different ways in which learning occurs at home and at school. This, in turn, has increased participation in and research into communities of learning (Rogoff, 1990, 1995, 2003). Most importantly, from this perspective, it is assumed that children cannot be “separated from the social and cultural processes through which they develop, the values and goals that inform the ways they are treated and understood, and the political context within which their lives are shaped” (Woodhead, 2006, p. 22). Implications of such theoretical perspectives are closely related to new understandings about the construction of children’s identities as situated within culture and language. Rather than viewing knowledge and development as universal, static, and unchangeable, the concept of what knowledge is has been broadened to include notions such as “funds of knowledge”—an understanding that local and particular knowledge(s) should be valued and be thought of as worthy (see, for example, Moll, 1992).

Of particular note in this regard is the inequity that exists in all countries, including Canada, where Indigenous populations struggle to achieve equity with dominant cultures. Accessing traditional K-12 schooling is only one predictor of success and can equally be seen as a determinant of failure. To redress this, life conditions for Indigenous children must be improved to reduce poverty, food insecurity, lack of transportation, exposure to racism, and lack of cultural inclusion (Ball, 2012). Given these barriers, early childhood care and education play a critical role in reducing inequities. Home-based programs that focus on children’s first teachers, their parents and extended families, deserve further support and research. This complements the need for locally based and valued cultural knowledge and practices in early learning care and learning. Such community-based initiatives often include Indigenous language acquisition, ensuring inter-generational relationships, a literacy of the land, and an appreciation of the importance of the spiritual development of the child (Ball, p. 287).

Because political and educational power is distributed unevenly in contemporary society, it is important that education faculties advocate for the underprivileged and often voiceless members of our society in their rights to pursue their own goals and approaches in promoting their children’s early education. The publication of the Association of Canadian Deans of Education’s (ACDE) *Accord on Indigenous Education* (2010a) endorses and advocates for such an approach across the broad education spectrum “to improve the quality of knowledge, understanding, and pedagogic skills that all educators gain about Indigenous education and Indigenous knowledge systems” (ACDE, 2010a, p. 6).

Other research focuses on the relationship of family and community with children and schooling. This research suggests that child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as happy and capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society. An approach to emotional, social, cognitive, and linguistic development that is balanced and contextually and culturally sensitive will best prepare all children for success in school and later in the workplace and community. This approach is especially important for families who are new to Canada or for minority language groups.

In addition, research indicates that supportive relationships and positive learning experiences begin at home but can also be provided through a range of services with proven effectiveness factors. Young children require stable, caring, interactive relationships with adults—in any way or in any place they can be provided (KSI Research International, 2003).

Educators working with young children are engaged with increasingly complex environments (including policy demands, ethnically and culturally diverse groups of children, changing measures of accountability, new technology, and public accountability). Especially with the rise in standardized curriculum frameworks, there is a threat that pedagogical work will be reduced to its technical aspects. In this context, structures are needed that support early learning educators through extended periods of preparation as well as ongoing professional development opportunities (Langford, 2010).

Historically the field of early childhood education (ECE) was closely aligned with the field of developmental psychology, but more recently the field has opened to other, more critical theoretical paradigms including postmodern (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), feminist (Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000), and reconceptualist theoretical perspectives (Iannacci & Whitty, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010).

Recent research suggests new understandings about learning that impact how we think about early childhood education. Some of this research, known as “brain” or neurobiological research, suggests that our brains develop over time and that both brain structure and a child’s developing abilities are built from the ground up. A scaffolding process allows for the development of more advanced ideas and skills over time. The combination of genes and experience literally shape the construction of the developing brain, and the research places a high value on the nature of children’s relationships with their parents, peers, and other caregivers.

Similarly, stress in early years is associated with damage to the developing brain structure and leads to lifelong problems in learning and behavior, affecting both physical and mental health. However, creating the right conditions for early learning is more effective and less costly than addressing these problems in later life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Neurobiological research continues to demonstrate that experience, both positive and negative, literally shapes the construction of the developing brain. The World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that education, and early childhood development in particular, was a key social determinant of health and a “powerful equalizer” (Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2007).

The discourse on early learning has expanded to include discussions about the nature of childhood, the quality of early childhood care and learning; how to measure such quality; and how to measure outcomes for children. The debate continues between authentic assessment that measures the child against him or herself and the provision of classroom environments where children are able to flourish, as opposed to standards based on developmental stages that are often normed by relatively small samples of children from a narrow socio-cultural-economic background and designed to make children “ready” for the next stage of their development.

Implications for practices that are child oriented and supported by current theories and research are numerous. Examples of such practices include making space and time to listen to children’s thoughts and perspectives though encouraging multiple ways of expressing ideas and the use of diverse media, including art, construction, drama and movement; designing learning environments in collaboration with children; and making visible children’s contributions to their learning processes through holistic, formative, and authentic assessment tools.

Many provincial educational jurisdictions in Canada have now developed and adopted early learning curriculum frameworks that emphasize child-centred, play-based, imaginative learning that attend to the whole child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Most jurisdictions also have policies promoting and supporting the professionalization of early care and learning. The field has moved considerably beyond the regimented care that asylums and orphanages provided to children in Canada in the 19th century; and beyond the well-intentioned caregivers and "baby-sitters" who were instructed to "be nice to the children and entertain them and herd them about" in the 20th century (Lysack, 2012). The fear that curriculum will turn early learning and childcare into formal schooling at too early an age is not without justification given the eagerness of provincial educational jurisdictions, often with the best of intentions, to adopt early years evaluation and assessment tools on children as young as three.

Section 3: Principles

The Association of Canadian Deans of Education espouses the following principles, which may serve to guide both practice in early learning environments and the preparation of early learning educators:

1. Early learning education focuses on the whole child.

This means that the cognitive, physical, social, spiritual, aesthetic, and emotional development of the child are all interrelated and must be taken into account in early learning environments. Early learning is strongly influenced by multiple and intertwined social, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

2. Children are capable and ready to learn, and should be viewed as full of potential.

There is no one set of standard expectations or desirable attributes that must be met or attained before children begin learning. Children and adults are continually self-creating, self-narrating, and responding to otherness.

3. Adults are ethically responsible for ensuring the health and well-being of children.

This responsibility includes the fostering of transformative and supportive relationships among children and between children and adults.

4. Families and community are valued and respected.

Early learning theory and practice appreciate that children's development occurs in the context of families and communities beyond formal care and learning centres. Families have the skills and knowledge to support their child's early learning but may require support to do so.

5. Curricula are responsive to children and families.

In emergent or generative curricula, goals and aims for learning are dynamic and changeable. Learning is a collaborative endeavour, in which educators, children, and families co-create learning situations that take into account their unique interests, experiences, and linguistic/ cultural environments.

6. Supportive relationships and interactions between teachers and children are valued and nurtured.

Planned and well-prepared learning environments offer children opportunities for full, balanced development of their abilities.

7. Early learning educators and environments provide meaningful and relevant opportunities for young children to interact with one another.

Different forms of informal and structured play develop language, understanding, social competence, self-regulation, physical strength, imagination, and creativity.

8. Early learning educators, appropriate environments, and community resources engage the minds of young children.

Learning opportunities arise through exploration, investigation, observation, and reflection on the world around them.

9. Early learning takes into account a wide range of philosophical, pedagogical, and theoretical approaches that inform policy and practice.

As such, early learning is best understood from a life perspective in which all phases of the lifespan are appreciated.

10. Early learning educators engage in care-full documentation of student learning and their own teaching.

Inclusive learning processes and assessments are holistic, formative, authentic, transparent, and well understood through representations of learning. These practices celebrate multiple languages and cultural identities, provide encouragement to families and community members to participate meaningfully in the lives of children, and nurture a democratic process. These practices are also contextual, interactive, and open to local voices.

11. Diversity and social responsibility are valued.

A focus on inclusiveness, equity, and democratic practices offer children choices and opportunities to develop a sense of their interdependence and dependence, an understanding of the importance of co-operation and collaboration, and a sense of community and their place in it.

12. Policy and practice in early learning are informed by current educational research, knowledge, and appreciation of this field as critical components of public education.

Education faculties play a crucial role in researching, teaching, and supporting this dynamic field. ACDE's Accord on Research in Education stresses that "investment in education research is essential, including support for the diverse range of education research...[for] knowledge advancement, societal development, and enhancing the public good (ACDE, 2010b, p. 4).

Section 4: Goals and Commitments

*T*he goal of this Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood Education is to advance early learning policies and practices that require educators to meet and respect children where and as they are.

ACDE supports the development of policies and practices in faculties to enable the application of the principles in this accord.

ACDE supports early learning practices that are attuned to the uniqueness of each child, and that are responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which each child lives.

ACDE supports policies and practices that encourage an integrated approach to services for early learning and care.

ACDE supports the development and use of assessment practices that help educators understand each child and provide evidence of the ways teaching practices and research are working in the classroom for families, educators and community at large. These practices are not linked solely to standards, testing and outcomes.

Section 5: Conclusion

*T*he Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood Education acknowledges the importance of the early years in shaping children's lives. The Accord highlights principles and practices that focus on the achievement of all children, and the responsibilities education faculties have for improving and advocating for education for preschool and primary children. The Accord also recognizes and respects educator knowledge and decision-making as vital to educational effectiveness for early learners.

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