

## Ontario's Full Day Kindergarten Program and School Readiness Candice Borges, Crystal Loxley and Sarah Melo

### Abstract

Ontario's Full Day Kindergarten was first introduced to the province in 2010 with full roll out across Ontario by 2014 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, pg. 19). The program was created with the intent of giving children "a stronger start in school" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, pg. 5). However, since the launch of the Full Day Kindergarten program little research has been done to prove its effectiveness in achieving its goals.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore the first-hand knowledge and experiences of Early Childhood Educators and Ontario Certified Teachers in the Ontario public schooling system. A web-based questionnaire was developed through Survey Monkey that inquired about the Full Day Kindergarten program and its effectiveness in preparing students for grade one. The researchers received a total of 347 responses over a 28-day period in January/ February 2020. 35% (n=256) of participants stated they could not agree that students leaving the Full Day Kindergarten program are academically prepared to enter grade one. Educators reported that the program is ineffective in its current version and requires some changes to help students better succeed. Participants cited class sizes, teaching partnerships, lack of support, and lack of teacher directed math and literacy components as some of the barriers of the effectiveness of the Full Day Kindergarten program.

This study suggests that policy makers and developers of curriculum should look at revising both grade one and the Full Day Kindergarten document to create a more seamless transition between kindergarten and grade one in order to foster better success for students. One example to help close the gap between expectations is the implementation of small academic expectations implemented into the Full Day Kindergarten program.

### Introduction

Many Ontario Certified Teachers and Registered Early Childhood Educators teaching the Full Day Kindergarten program and grade one say that students are not ready for grade one (Youmans, 2016, pg. 1). In addition, kindergarten class sizes have reached up to 32 students, which contributes to a lack of adult scaffolding within the classroom and leaves educators wondering if children "are actually learning anything new" (Youmans, 2016, pg.145). Furthermore, educators' face challenges closing the gap between Full Day Kindergarten's play-based curriculum and the grade one expectations stating, "literacy and numeracy is decreasing dramatically because there is only so much we can do with play-based centres." (Lynch, M. 2014, pg 38).

This study explored the barriers and benefits of the Full Day Kindergarten program through the perspectives of Ontario Certified Teachers and Early Childhood Educators.

### Literature Review

In grade one children are expected to possess skills of early literacy and numeracy, and have a good grasp on self-regulation. One of the purposes for the implementation of the Full Day Kindergarten program was an "overall plan to help more children get a strong start on school" (Youmans, 2016, pg.111). However, "the challenge of finding a balance between implementing play-based approaches to learning and meeting curriculum standards is a challenge teachers encounter on an international level" (Pyle, Prioletta & Poliszczuk, 2018 para. 23).

Current literature shows one of the barriers in the complete success of the Full Day Kindergarten program is the working relationship between the Registered Early Childhood Educator and the Ontario Certified Teacher. Registered Early Childhood Educators struggle to find time to plan their activities or co-plan with Ontario Certified Teachers (Underwood et al, 2016 pg. 3). In addition, a lack of clarity on the details surrounding their roles also affect the dynamic in the classroom (Timmons, 2018 pg. 6). This can negatively impact the quality of the Full Day Kindergarten environment, personal well-being, and professional relationship between teaching partners.

In addition to logistical issues, educators face the task of reconciling the Full Day Kindergarten expectations and the grade one curriculum; "a lack of emphasis on literacy within play-contexts may exacerbate the challenge of balancing play as a pedagogical tool and ensuring children meet particular curriculum standards." (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018, para. 36). Current research shows that, "while many teachers expressed the belief that oral language was important; [practiced during 'free-play'], it is not sufficient for teaching core skills that benefit from targeted instruction, such as phonics and writing (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018, para. 36).

Furthermore, a loud environment, behavioural issues and large student to teacher ratios become an everyday struggle for educators. Lynch states, "It is clear that a full day of play-based learning... is not meeting the academic needs of our kids" (Lynch, 2014, pg.38). Large class sizes create a barrier for educators to implement the curriculum in the highest standard (Lynch, 2014 pg. 34). Educators need opportunities to spend one-on-one time with students in order to scaffold learning and promote further development.

The purpose of this research is to (1) inform practice, (2) fill a gap in current research and (3) influence policy change. This research can help inform practice by providing information on the current outcomes and shortcomings of the current practice in the Full Day Kindergarten program. Educators who are more informed may be more inclined to change their practices and impact positive change for students. We also noticed that currently there is not much research done on the long-term effects of the Full Day Kindergarten program, this may be due to the programs fairly recent emergence. Therefore, this research can help to identify the need for such a study. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, this research can help to inform policy changes in the Full Day Kindergarten program. Policy makers can use this research as a point of reference to help create a more conceptualized version of the Full Day Kindergarten document. This may help to eliminate the current misunderstandings that aide in some of the shortcomings of the Full Day Kindergarten program.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

A quantitative method using a questionnaire was the chosen method for this research. The quantitative method served useful as this research sought to study a large sample size of Ontario Certified Teachers and Registered Early Childhood Educators. Researchers used an online survey tool (Survey Monkey) to collect the data.

#### Instrument

The method employed for this data collection was an online component. Researchers used Survey Monkey to create the online questionnaire and collect data through Survey Monkey's collection portal. Participants were sent a link to the online questionnaire that took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete, it contained 20 multiple choice questions and 4 open-ended questions.

#### Procedure

##### Procedure

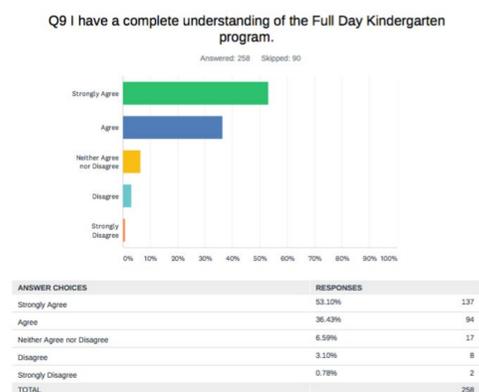
For the success of the research study, the data collection procedure was conducted in the following steps:

1. Researchers submitted an application to the Sheridan Research Ethics Board for permission to conduct the study.
2. Researchers sought participants who were Registered Early Childhood Educators and Ontario Certified Teachers. Simple random sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants.
3. Researchers aimed to have a minimum of 80 participants, utilizing simple random and snowball sampling.
4. Researchers shared a link to complete the questionnaire on Survey Monkey through email and social media groups (Facebook).
5. Researchers were able to recruit 347 participants.
6. Once the questionnaire was closed, researchers used the data collected to analyze and draw conclusions.

#### Participants

The target population for this study included Ontario Certified Teachers and Registered Early Childhood Educators with experience in the Full Day Kindergarten program and/or grade one. Participants were recruited from elementary school boards and social media discussion groups such as Facebook.

- 38% (n=319) of participants were ECEs and 62% (n=319) were OCTs.
- 29% (n=315) of participants reported between 1-4 years of experience in the FDK program.
- 30% (n=313) of participants reported between 1-4 years of experience in grade one.
- 64% (n=315) of participants reported having 4 or more years of experience in the FDK program.
- 16% (n=313) of participants reported having 4 or more years of experience in grade one.
- 78% (n=313) of participants reported they have attended a public-school board approved professional development program on the Ontario's Full Day Kindergarten program while 21% answered no they have not attended.



- More than half of the participants strongly agree that they have a full understanding of the Full Day Kindergarten Program.

### Results and Discussion

Figure 2.1 shows that many educators feel that students may not be academically prepared to enter grade one. 58% (n= 256) of respondents reported that they could not agree that students may be academically prepared to move on to grade one. 43% (n= 250) of respondents were unsure if their students would be able to write letters A-Z accurately, and 38% (n=250) of respondents reported that students may not have complete phonetic awareness by the end of the program.

Participants expressed concern about the gap between expectations from kindergarten to grade one, and that children not academically prepared for grade one. Participant stated,

- "the expectations in grade 1 are so much that students are falling behind. The gap is too big. Kids with 1 extra year of schooling should be way more ahead not falling behind" (Participant #22)
- "the program is inadequate and does not bridge the gap effectively." (Participant #88).

Figure 2.1  
Q11 Students are academically prepared to enter grade one after completing the Full Day Kindergarten program.

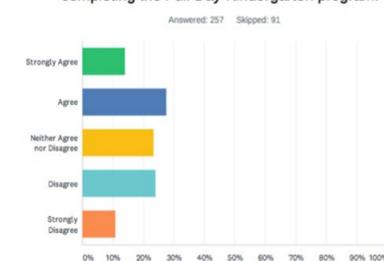


Figure 2.2 shows (n=258) of participants strongly agreed that the relationship between Early Childhood Educators and Ontario Certified Teachers affects the learning environment. Participants made comments in regard to the relationship between the ECE and OCT and how it plays an integral role in making the program effective. Participants stated:

- "I believe it is very effective if the ECE and OCT work together towards a common goal." (Participant #75)
- "The teacher and DECE partnership is important to be a positive one between each other because the Environment plays an important role and the educators can affect that" (Participant #102)
- "I think with a strong partnership most classrooms can successfully have their students learn emotionally and academically" (Participant #120)

#### Recommendations

Based on the findings the researchers conclude that the FDK program is an essential part of the education system and a good introduction to formal schooling. However, as the program has not been reviewed since it's launch, the researchers suggest changes should be made to improve its effectiveness. Based on the findings researchers recommend the following:

- inclusion of academic expectations for students, such as counting, writing, and recognizing numbers 1-10.
- further research is required to obtain more sustainable evidence on the effects of large class sizes
- a formal 'co-teaching' model between educators should be outlined in order to ensure its success in the classroom.

Figure 2.2

Q8 What do you believe should be the MAXIMUM class size in order to run an effective Full Day Kindergarten program?

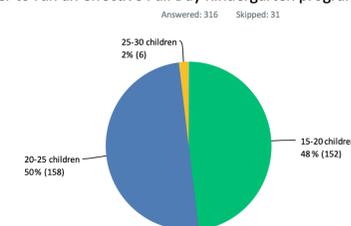


Figure 2.3 shows that a majority of our participants agreed that an average kindergarten classroom should have between 15-25 students. When the researchers asked how many children the participants had in their classroom currently, 67% (n=303) indicated that they have 25-30 children. More than half of our participants currently have a class size that they do not agree will set a standard for a successful Full Day Kindergarten Program. Meghan Lynch, author of Ontario Kindergarten Teachers' Social Media Discussions About Full Day Kindergarten, exposes the concerns with large classroom sizes and the struggles that come with it. One teacher in the article mentioned, "The noise levels keep the students agitated and fighting all day long... reports about the impact of cramming 34 small children into one small class have me thinking about switching to a different grade" (Lynch, 2014, para.22). There are a number of concerns on the effects that large classroom sizes have on a child's social/emotional development as well as academic development and growth throughout the program.

Figure 2.3

Q10 The relationship between Registered Early Childhood Educator and Ontario Certified Teacher affects the learning environment.

