

## Introduction to Research in Early Child Development

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## Introduction to Research in Early Child Development

### The Prince Edward Island Context

The Research in Early Child Development (RECD) Initiative is a collaboration between the [Centre for Education Research \(CER\)](#) at the [University of Prince Edward Island \(UPEI\)](#) and the [PEI Children's Secretariat \(PEI CS\)](#). The latter is an organization composed of 12 networks in Prince Edward Island (PEI) focused on a variety of issues of early child development, from pre-natal to eight years of age. The PEI CS includes both non-governmental agencies and representatives from federal and provincial agencies who work in the area of child development.

When researchers at the Faculty of Education at UPEI were approached by the co-chairs of the PEI CS regarding the development of a project, initial work focused on conducting an environmental scan to determine the availability of research and resources in Canada. The development of a literature review followed, which allowed the research team to analyze and synthesize current research work, and then begin to develop a model for early child development in PEI. The team adopted this model from the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and his bioecological approach to early child development (2005).

The RECD model describes the influences of the environment in which the child lives flowing both *inward* toward the individual child and *outward*—how the child influences the various components of his or her world throughout his or her development as a person. This model focuses on interactions and mutual influences — child, family, community, society, and the global world. The model formed the basis to engage the various member organizations of the PEI CS in a data-gathering exercise to determine the programs and services offered in PEI.

The UPEI team facilitated a PEI CS information session to share key understandings from the literature, to discuss the principles of the potential childhood development framework, and to develop a plan for moving forward. Members shared the types of data collected in the course of daily operations with one another. In addition, groups discussed “goodness-of-fit” between the emergent child development framework and their own conceptualization of early child development.

This work resulted in the understanding that many organizations collected large amounts of data; however, this information was not shared or used to benefit the members of the sector as a whole. It was determined that a process to collect and share the data would be

an important step forward for all PEI CS members. Accordingly, the RECD research team then began to collect, analyze, and organize information on what the various organizations were doing. The data was collated, placed on a poster, and taken back to each organization for feedback and revisions.

During the review of the poster, members of the PEI CS could view the gaps in services and data quite easily, as well as see where many groups were placing their programming emphasis. These gaps pointed out the need for further thought regarding programs and services and how these could best meet the needs of PEI children.

The next step in this process involved the presentation of several workshops on action research (AR), outlining the purpose of AR to the member organizations, while facilitating the development of research projects for those organizations that were interested in doing so. Eventually, five of the 12 member groups of the PEI CS wrote a research proposal. The RECD team supported these groups in their AR projects, which lasted anywhere from six to nine months. In some cases, an organization's AR project led to a new research proposal for the ensuing year. More detailed information about these five research projects is shared later in this monograph.

Concurrent with the development of the action research projects by the five PEI CS groups, the RECD team undertook the creation of an online learning space. This space—PEI Child ([www.peichild.ca](http://www.peichild.ca))—is also described at length in this monograph. The development of an online environment was conceptualized as an opportunity for the early child development community in PEI to find more effective and efficient ways of working with their own members, as well as with other PEI CS members. To that end, there are a variety of ways in which members of organizations can now discuss, meet, and make decisions online. In addition, researchers in the area of early child development are invited to come to the site and to request membership in the researchers' space, where conversations about research initiatives can be held.

### **Kindergarten on Prince Edward Island**

A description of the context of the RECD Initiative would not be complete without mention of a major change currently occurring in the kindergarten sector in Prince Edward Island. In 2008, the provincial government appointed a commissioner to review the state of kindergarten on PEI and to make recommendations regarding potential actions. Government accepted the kindergarten commissioner's report in the spring of 2009. The recommendations involved a major shift from community-based kindergarten, in which children attend kindergarten in an early learning centre (ELC), to the positioning of kindergarten in the public schools. Besides the change in venue, those early childhood educators who taught kindergarten were potentially moving into the school system as well. This will have a major impact on the staffing and viability of a number of the ELCs.

These changes will be taking place in the fall of 2010, and have resulted in a number of consultations, committees, task-force reports, the development of an extended university program, and a second commissioned report on the state of the kindergarten sector in Prince Edward Island. The second report was called for by the kindergarten commissioner to provide a comprehensive review of early learning programs and services in PEI, leading to “a plan for a sustainable, high quality, accessible early childhood system serving all Island children and their families” (Mella, 2009, p.109). In her call for further work, Commissioner Mella focused on the implementation of Canada’s QUAD (quality, universality, accessibility, and developmental) vision for early child development. This report will be presented to the government of Prince Edward Island in April 2010.

### The Canadian Context

Early child development is being studied across Canada. Organizations such as the Council for Early Child Development (CECD) and the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) in British Columbia, as well as provincial and territorial governments, are working to raise awareness and to share the importance of facilitating positive learning environments for young children in Canada.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has reported that over 25% of Canadian children start kindergarten with such pervasive challenges that many are at risk of not completing their high school education. Of twenty OECD countries, Canada has the lowest rate of parental access to early childhood education programs for children ages three to six. Yet, the research overwhelmingly points to the importance of providing early childhood education and care for young children. The OECD made four critical recommendations to Canada to improve early childhood program implementation and delivery: (1) build bridges between childcare and kindergarten; (2) integrate kindergarten and childcare to bring real advantages in Canada; (3) conceptualize and deliver care and education as one seamless program; and (4) have a single provincial department responsible for childcare and kindergarten (Beach, 2009).

Some of these OECD recommendations are being addressed in different jurisdictions throughout Canada. Provincial and territorial governments, non-governmental organizations, and researchers are working to ameliorate concerns. There have been a number of recent initiatives in Canada: Ontario is moving to integrated care and education for 4- and 5-year-olds (*Early Learning for Every Child Today*); British Columbia has conducted a study of full day kindergarten for 5-year-olds (*Strong Start in Selected Schools*); the Saskatchewan childcare department has been moved to the

Ministry of Education; the PEI Department of Education has been reorganized as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development; and Manitoba has just announced a new childcare in schools policy. The Council for Early Child Development has organized three conferences in the past 18 months to explore these issues, to ensure that practitioners and policy makers are aware of the research being conducted on the brain development of young children, and to facilitate the use of this research when making policy decisions.

Currently in Canada, research on early child development tends to take a quantitative approach, focusing on the development of the brain and linking long-term health benefits with economics. The message of researchers working in this area is clear:

Environment and experiences in the early years stimulate sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste pathways for brain development. Good nutrition and positive stimulation in the early years establish the neural pathways in the brain for optimum learning, behaviour, physical and mental health.  
(Mustard, 2008, 2009)

Mustard, Shankar, and Hertzman —Canadian researchers and theorists working in the field— have issued a strong call for high quality early child development programs, which would provide children with optimal environments including approaches such as play-based problem solving. Information about the science of brain development is being disseminated widely across Canada, with new resources being made available to practitioners and researchers such as *The Science of Early Child Development* online resource.

The ongoing work on the science of brain development addresses the importance of early child development from only one aspect of Canadian children's growth. This research tells an important part of the story, but it does not tell the entire story. Other researchers in Canada working in the area of early childhood focus on alternative aspects of children's lives. These researchers are interested in exploring early childhood from a qualitative perspective. Researchers from across Canada have joined together as a team to identify current initiatives, determine points of intersecting interests, and develop a coherent approach to new research studies. The pan-Canadian team of researchers has been meeting via teleconference over the past nine months, and will be gathering in Prince Edward Island in the spring of 2010 to plan new research initiatives. These researchers are coming from British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island.

During this meeting, current research projects will be shared with PEI policy makers and practitioners. The team's research expertise may ensure that current research in early

child development is used for evidence-based decision making. This approach is critical as PEI makes a major change in early education and care when kindergarten migrates into the school system. Team members will also have the opportunity for a series of sessions focused on developing new qualitative projects or extending existing projects in early childhood. The goals of the meeting are threefold: (1) to create a pan-Canadian research team pertaining to healthy early childhood development, and, therefore, a national research strategy on healthy early child development; (2) to hold a meeting of the pan-Canadian research team in order to review current findings, identify new research questions, draft a framework for national research priorities in early child development, and prepare a plan for future funding applications to continue the national research strategy; and (3) to facilitate knowledge exchange surrounding research in early childhood by bringing key people together. The pan-Canadian team looks forward to engaging in a productive meeting with long-term consequences for researchers and practitioners alike.

### RECD Monograph

As we look ahead, to new initiatives such as the formation and development of a pan-Canadian team, and to innovative research projects exploring emerging issues in early child development on PEI, it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the work that has been accomplished. This chapter in the work of the RECD Initiative is coming to a close, with many components of the project shared in this monograph. The monograph includes:

- an explanation of the framework used to underpin the work;
- a literature review situating the work of the RECD team in current research initiatives;
- an explanation of the data poster, in which the programs, services, and data collected by the PEI CS networks are presented;
- a summary of the action research projects conducted by the networks which were supported by the RECD initiative;
- a description of PEI Child, the online collaborative learning tool designed for those involved with the early childhood sector; and
- five papers written by practitioners who have explored issues such as play and numeracy and the needs of parents with young children.

This monograph also includes the pertinent knowledge translation pieces developed at the UPEI Centre for Education Research—the Centre for Education Research translations (CERTs). All pieces of the monograph will be available at the UPEI Centre for Education Research website ([www.upei.ca/cer](http://www.upei.ca/cer)) and at the PEI Child digital learning commons ([www.peichild.ca](http://www.peichild.ca)). We hope the reader will find the description of the RECD Initiative

informative, as well as engaging. The writing represents work conducted by a large group of researchers and practitioners from the spring of 2008 to the spring of 2010.

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## Web Resources

Council for Early Child Development: <http://www.councilecd.ca/>

Human Early Learning Partnership: <http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/index.html>

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

The Science of Early Child Development: <http://www.scienceofecd.com/>