

Early Childhood Education:

Teaching and Learning in Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3

**Position Paper
of the
Early Childhood Education Council
of the
Alberta Teachers' Association**

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Preamble:

As we enter the 21st century, renewed interest in the crucial importance of the early years in a child's educational journey is encouraging. However, when this interest is misdirected toward increased emphasis on academics, test scores, and "standards", we risk losing the sense of wonder that should permeate early childhood (K-3) classrooms.

We must strive to preserve and build on the foundation of hands-on, experiential, play-based learning that research has proven to be the most effective in helping young students make sense of the world. By providing children with early opportunities to develop socially, physically, creatively, emotionally, intellectually, and morally, we launch them into a future of lifelong learning.

The Early Childhood Education Council's Statement of Position:

Since its inception in 1966, the Early Childhood Education Council's mandate has been to facilitate the professional development of teachers from kindergarten (formerly E.C.S.) to Grade 3, and to improve the quality of early childhood education as practiced in Alberta. A statement of position which clarifies the nature of early childhood, identifies how K-3 children learn, and emphasizes appropriate educational practices is necessary to help members of the Council attain these goals and become effective advocates for young students.

Children are growing up in a rapidly changing world characterized by pressure to succeed in all areas. Rate of development and a narrow focus on academic achievement has often become more important than encouragement of individual development, provision for enriching educational experiences and growth within a community of learners. This emphasis has placed pressure on both children and teachers.

Educational practices must change in response to an ever-expanding world. However, these changes should be based on principles of child development and learning, reflecting knowledge gained through valid current and historical research. As teachers of young children, we must continue to provide early learning experiences rich in drama, music, literature, and art, supporting our students in classroom environments that stress cooperation, sharing, kindness, and community. We must continue to involve their families in meaningful ways, clearly explaining what we do and why we do it. And we must continue to support each other, sharing our time, expertise, and friendship as we journey together through the wonderful, "wonder-full", world of Early Childhood Education...

Principles of Child Development:

During their early years, children are curious and intimately involved in exploring and manipulating objects, events, and even people in their immediate environment. In their attempts to make sense of the world, they use prior understanding to construct new knowledge, through active engagement with a variety of people and materials. The quality of these experiences powerfully shapes the potential for future learning. Both adults and peers support and guide these endeavors, using language as a conduit for communication.

Children develop language by using it. Interaction with others facilitates the growth of communication skills; motivation to learn language is intrinsic in the social context. Immersion, ESL, and regular students first develop a sense of purpose and shared meaning through the use of spoken words. Through speaking, drawing, and later, the integration of reading and writing, children represent, interpret, and recreate life events. As they engage in a variety of experiences, language, thought, and reasoning become more complex and abstract.

It is essential that teachers consider each child from a holistic perspective. Cultural, social-emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative facets of development are closely interrelated. Development in one area influences and is influenced by development in all the other areas. Although predictable sequences of human development appear to exist, children are individuals, and exhibit varied patterns of growth that fall within the range of “normal”, as defined by our cultural bias. Children’s cultural and home backgrounds must be taken into account when teachers plan for instruction, to allow for gentle integration and acceptance into the classroom community.

Current understanding of child development and learning in the early years is a synthesis of historical theory, observation, and research, and will continue to evolve as our knowledge and experience increase. Therefore, it is crucial that we strive to keep ourselves informed of advances in the field, while basing our teaching practices on legitimate early childhood education philosophies and principles. Always, the best interests of the whole child are the heart of what we do.

Members of the Early Childhood Education Council base their teaching philosophy on the following principles of child development:

- Children learn through play and personal experience, motivated by their natural curiosity and desire to make sense of their world.
- Learning occurs in a social context, as children observe and interact with people and the environment, using prior knowledge to make sense of new experiences.
- Language and thought are vehicles for children’s exploring, constructing, and communicating their experiences.

- Sensory and perceptual motor experiences are crucial to children's development.
- Children's cultural, social-emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative growth develop concurrently and cannot be separated.
- Developmental rates vary, and are shaped by innate capacity, cultural and environmental influences, situational context, and chronological age.
- A positive self-concept is crucial to learning.
- Self-esteem and the confidence to take risks are fostered in a supportive environment that allows children to make choices and recognizes their individuality.
- Children have the potential to accept responsibility for guiding their own learning.
- Families and cultural backgrounds play significant roles in the growth and development of children.

Principles of Practice:

The education of young children must be accepted as a joint and continuing responsibility of the home, the school, and the community. Parents and teachers should work together to support the child in the learning process, and to provide stimulating learning experiences, in a cooperative spirit of mutual respect.

In planning for K-3 classrooms, it is essential to use knowledge related to child development and learning, as well as to consider the child's need to function in an increasingly complex society. Organization should be flexible and holistic to free the child to interact with the carefully prepared, supportive environment that offers relevant and meaningful experiences. Parental involvement, visitors, and off-site excursions are integral features of the K-3 program, providing legitimate connections with the wider community. The social nature of teaching and learning are recognized, and each child is respected and valued as an individual.

Members of the Early Childhood Education Council support, encourage, and demonstrate practices that provide for:

- continuity of learning through the primary grades and beyond
- integration of subject areas to facilitate in-depth study of emergent interests, with large blocks of time to create sustained engagement
- flexible, multi-aged groupings whenever possible
- classrooms planned and organized to involve children actively, allowing for choice, risk-taking, and hands-on construction of knowledge
- modeling of both effective problem-posing and problem-solving techniques
- respect for cultures, backgrounds, and other differences
- involvement of families, and community resources
- ongoing assessment as an integral part of classroom instruction, that documents, supports, and encourages children's growth toward personal excellence

Principles of Student Assessment:

Evaluation, a focus on that which is of value, is an integral part of teaching and learning. As such, student assessment must be ongoing, contextual, formative, and broadly based. Children, parents, and teachers all have contributions to make to the assessment process.

Evaluation strategies implemented in K-3 classrooms must reflect the learner expectations described in Alberta Learning's Program of Studies, while emphasizing the connections between teaching practices, learning experiences, and assessment techniques. Appropriate evaluation assists in planning, implementing, and adjusting each of these to provide optimal potential for progress for each child.

Assessment that focuses on a child's growth along a continuum of personal development promotes self-confidence, and provides motivation for continued learning. Acknowledging and celebrating the child's progression toward greater understanding enhances self-esteem: experiencing success inspires him to keep trying. A young student also needs to be intimately involved in setting goals for himself. This encourages him to fulfill his responsibility as a contributing member of the learning community. Self-evaluation encourages ownership of the learning process.

Communicating the results of ongoing student assessment to parents, and providing opportunities for their input is essential. As the home and school work in collaboration, mutual understanding of the child's learning process is made possible.

Members of the Early Childhood Education Council support, encourage, and implement assessment practices that:

- reflect our principles of child development and teaching practices
- promote a child's continuous progress through the early grades, focusing on goals that are in the child's best interests
- are used diagnostically to personalize instruction and to adjust programs to fit children's needs
- involve the child and the child's family in meaningful dialogue with the school
- are relevant to classroom practices and the child's experiences therein

Principles of Professional Development:

Teachers are responsible for providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for students, integrating students with special needs into the classroom, promoting and coordinating family and community involvement, and continually seeking to improve curriculum, teaching techniques, and assessment

practices. Ongoing professional development is essential to assist teachers in carrying out these duties most effectively.

Many types of professional development are necessary, that recognize stages of teachers' careers, changes to the Program Of Studies, and changes in the wider community. Study groups, collaborative projects, professional reading, workshops, conferences, and university courses are all ways for teachers to maintain their expertise in the field. Further opportunities to develop leadership skills, expand knowledge, and build wider networks of collegial support include membership in specialist councils, conventions boards, and local professional development committees.

It is our responsibility as K-3 teachers to seek appropriate professional development activities, based on personal reflection on our own teaching practices, changes in assignment, and special interests. The creation and maintenance of a professional portfolio, together with a carefully considered Teacher's Professional Growth Plan, can contribute to continued enthusiasm throughout our careers.

Members of the Early Childhood Education Council support, encourage, and participate in professional development opportunities that:

- reflect our principles of child development, teaching practices, and student assessment
- inform teachers of legitimate current research in early childhood education
- facilitate appropriate classroom practices and curriculum for K-3 students
- provide opportunities for research, reflection, and growth over time
- promote professional responsibility, commitment, and pursuit of personal excellence
- facilitate collegial collaboration across K-3 levels
- respect the professionalism and expertise of classroom teachers

The Early Childhood Education Council endorses the positions of the Canadian Association for Young Children, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, whose work heavily influenced this document.