

How Does Learning Happen? Inspirational pedagogy in everyday practice depends on a well-supported ECE workforce

On June 8, 2015 the Ministry of Education did something significant. The impact on the Ontario ECEs will be lasting. It was on that date that the Ministry released a policy statement identifying *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (2014)* as the document to be used for guiding licensed child care programs.¹ The policy statement also directed every child care program licensee to develop a program statement that is consistent with the programming and pedagogy described in *How Does Learning Happen?* – and, it must be reviewed annually.

In short, these directives from the Ministry mean that every Ontario ECE professional in every licensed child care and early years program will be required to understand and articulate the content of *How Does Learning Happen?*; to use it to guide practice; and, to reflect on its value in strengthening program quality, ultimately, for the purpose of fostering “children’s learning, development, health and well-being” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.12).

The AECEO has prepared this article for the purpose of describing *how* these new responsibilities will involve a momentous intellectual and collaborative undertaking by the 46,000+ registered members of the College of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario (CECE, 2015). In this article we ask, and then offer some responses to, a critical question:

- What structural supports are needed to ensure that ECE professionals have the capacity to successfully implement *How Does Learning Happen?*

As well, in the spirit of *How Does Learning Happen?*, we ask a few other provocative questions to stimulate dialogue and discussion about the status quo and the need for systemic change so that new policy directives can be implemented successfully.

How Does Learning Happen? is an Intellectual Tool for Discussions on Values, Theories, and Beliefs

How Does Learning Happen? describes Ontario educators as “knowledgeable, caring, reflective and resourceful professionals” who will use the document as a professional resource guide or curriculum framework rather than a prescribed curriculum (p. 7). The document acknowledges the intense reflection Ontario ECE professionals must engage in when using *How Does Learning Happen?* and describes this work as “thinking, feeling and acting” (p. 20).

A curriculum framework, as it is described in the New South Wales Early Learning Framework, is a kind of “sieve through which the professional “sifts” thinking as a means of reflecting critically on practice” (Office of Childcare, 2004, p. 20). The ‘thinking’ that this description refers to “is the vision, beliefs, values and principles related to early learning and pedagogy” (Langford, 2012, p. 210). The notion of actively sifting ideas and thinking about practice is also present in *How Does Learning Happen?* as it compels ECE professionals to discuss, interpret, investigate, and act on “constantly evolving” values, theories and beliefs (p. 5). The process is not expected to be effortless by any means, as the document further states:

This thinking may require for some, a shift in mindsets and habits. It may prompt a rethinking of theories and practices – a change in what we pay attention to, in the conversations that we have with children, families and colleagues and in how we plan and prepare (p. 17).

¹ Subsection 55 (3) of the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*

How Does Learning Happen? does not stand alone as the only curriculum framework Ontario ECE professionals are expected to use. *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) is now viewed as a foundational document for *How Does Learning Happen?* and, together, they represent an “evolving understanding of children, pedagogy and the role of educators in supporting learning in the early years” (p.10).

How Does Learning Happen? as an intellectual tool is designed to be “inspiring”, “provocative,” “challenging of the status quo” (p.13), and “transformational” (p.3). Ontario ECE professionals will, therefore, have much intellectual work to do in understanding, interpreting and implementing *How Does Learning Happen?*

How Does Learning Happen? is a Collaborative Tool for Critical Reflection and Discussion with Others

How Does Learning Happen? is not intended to be used by an ECE professional in isolation from others. In the document, educators are referred to as co-learners, researchers, and members of communities of practice. The content of *How Does Learning Happen?* is designed to stimulate discussion and dialogue among ECEs, administrators, children, families, allied professionals and communities about values, theories and beliefs concerning early learning and diversity in children’s development. *How Does Learning Happen?* states ECE professionals “collaborate with others to create engaging environments and experiences to foster children’s learning and development” (p. 7).

How Does Learning Happen? sets out the expectation that through critical reflection and collaborative inquiry educators in their programs and services will arrive at shared pedagogical understandings that are dynamic and evolving – in other words, their shared understandings are always subject to change based on new experiences, research, and theory (p. 20). *How Does Learning Happen?* provides examples of educator teams, such as “a group of educators from several programs...” and describes ways that they might work together, as in “... [they] may study their practice and share their experiences in relation to one of the goals for children” (p.13). The expectation is that educators will work collaboratively on pedagogical documentation, a complex process of making children’s learning visible to parents, colleagues and communities for interpretation and discussion (p. 22). *How Does Learning Happen?* as a collaborative pedagogy is designed for critical reflection and discussion with others. Ontario ECE professionals will therefore have much work to do in reflecting on their practice while using *How Does Learning Happen?* with colleagues.

In this next section, we examine what structural supports need to be in place in every child care and early years program and service across the province so that ECE professionals are supported in implementing *How Does Learning Happen?* intellectually and collaboratively.

John Bennett, *Starting Strong I & II* co-author and influential contributor to our current understandings of effective ECEC systems, identified the necessary conditions for successful implementation of a curriculum framework. Two of the essential conditions he identified are: 1. the “presence of well-qualified, motivated staff” and 2. the “requisite structural features” such as adequate investments in buildings and outdoor environments and investments in human resources (2004, p. 18). Added to this is a growing body of research on quality in early learning and child care which indicates that the compensation, working conditions and the professional preparation of early childhood educators are the top predictors of quality at the program level (Langford & Halfon, 2015). These predictors, then, are a good starting place for us to examine the necessary supports that will enable Ontario’s ECE professionals to use *How Does Learning Happen?* as an inspirational pedagogy in everyday practice.

A Successful Curriculum Framework Requires Adequate Compensation

We will be bold and ask the tough question: Can the successful implementation of Ontario’s pedagogy for the early years happen at \$11.00 an hour? Almost half of Ontario’s RECEs (45%) earned between \$15 and \$20 an hour in 2015 - which means that the wages of many RECEs are even lower, falling to \$11.00 an hour (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Is it reasonable and fair to ask ECE professionals to do the considerable intellectual and collaborative work required in implementing *How Does Learning Happen?* at these wages? Moreover, research consistently shows a strong relationship between adequate compensation and program quality (see the recent publication prepared by the U.S. Department of Education, 2016). We argue that if one of the goals of *How Does Learning Happen?* is to strengthen program quality, then failing to address chronic low wages for ECE professionals in Ontario undermines this important goal.

Furthermore, the challenges of implementing *How Does Learning Happen?* increase when such complex intellectual and collaborative responsibilities are placed on a highly gendered and marginalized workforce. When such responsibilities are mandated through regulation, and then layered on a tenuous workforce foundation, the challenges become even more troublesome. Without adequate compensation can we expect our ECE professionals to *feel* professional, to *feel* competent, and to *feel* valued as educators? Without adequate compensation, how will the early learning and child care sector attract and retain a workforce dedicated to undertaking the intellectual and collaborative work of *How Does Learning Happen?* in the long term?

A Successful Curriculum Framework Requires Sufficient Time to Reflect, Plan and Document with Others

How Does Learning Happen? describes educators as “reflective practitioners who learn about children using various strategies” (p.19). But we ask: To be a reflective practitioner, wouldn’t ECE professionals require more time to reflect, plan, document and work with others than the amount of time available (and in the dark) while the children are sleeping? We suggest that it is fundamental to the implementation of *How Does Learning Happen?* that professionals in all early learning and child care programs have sufficient time during their paid work day to intellectually and collaboratively engage with the values, theories and beliefs articulated in Ontario’s early years pedagogy. *How Does Learning Happen?* outlines expectations for employers to “help educators become researchers and co-learners with children, parents, caregivers, and colleagues – learning about children, families, and the early years environment” (p.13). These expectations increase the pressure on administrators to provide ECE professionals with working conditions that foster inquiry based and collaborative learning environments. Programs, especially stand-alone non-profits, will need to find innovative ways to ensure that ECE professionals are supported in their research and co-learning with children, parents and colleagues while still maintaining good working conditions.

A Successful Curriculum Framework Requires Sufficient Professional Preparation and Learning

Within the last decade, Ontario’s ECE professionals have experienced an intense professionalization of their work achieved through legislation and regulation. In 2007 the provincial government passed the *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007* which mandated that all ECEs working in programs with young children become members of the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE). Ontario is the only province in Canada to introduce a self-regulatory body, effectively making ECEs a distinct professional group with the protected title of Registered ECE (RECE). The minimum training requirement for RECEs in Ontario is a two-year diploma in early childhood education which requires a set amount of practicum/field experience from an Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology (OCAAT) or from an approved post-secondary institution. Soon the CECE will have the mandate to accredit these post-secondary programs.

Yet important questions remain: Will the CECE’s accreditation requirements include details related to preparation and support for students so they can meaningfully implement *How Does Learning Happen?* when they enter the ECE field? Further, are ECEs working in early learning and child care programs where students complete their necessary field placements prepared to mentor students in the pedagogy of *How Does Learning Happen?* and in its underlying vision, theories and beliefs?

This year the CECE introduced a Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) program which requires RECEs to document their professional learning goals, objectives and achievements. CPL is a good opportunity for RECEs to dedicate time towards understanding the pedagogical elements of *How Does Learning Happen?* We suggest, however, that there is more to this process than RECEs dedicating their time to participate in CPL: research indicates that a “comprehensive professional development *system* for pre-service and in-service teachers is important” especially, we are proposing, for building the knowledge and collaborative practices ECEs need to implement the complex pedagogy envisioned in *How Does Learning Happen?* (Schilder, 2016, p. 7).

Looking Ahead

The AECEO has made recommendations to the Ontario Government for a coordinated human resources strategy with well-articulated short, mid and long term goals that include appropriate compensation, pensions, and good working conditions. As the Ministry of Education continues to modernize Ontario’s child care system, the implementation of a human resources strategy is a necessary and important measure to achieve their commitment to a “system of responsive, safe, high quality and accessible child care” (CCEYA, 2014). Part of a ‘modernized child care system’ is its ability to attract and retain trained and committed professionals

who are capable of implementing *How Does Learning Happen?* In the best interest of all ECE professionals working in Ontario's early learning and child care sector, it is imperative that the AECEO carries this work forward.

In taking on this substantial commitment, the AECEO has begun working with early learning communities across Ontario to document their human resources (HR) needs. As we push ahead we must also work collaboratively with leaders, administrators, researchers, labour movements and municipalities in order to effectively put forth HR recommendations that meaningfully reflect the realities of ECE professionals no matter where they work in the sector. A workforce strategy should address all of the challenges and issues raised within this paper. It should serve as a tool for ECE professionals to understand how we can affect positive change when we tap into our collective voice.

Now is an opportune time, in the midst of policy and regulatory changes, to amplify this pertinent conversation about compensation, working conditions and professional preparation and learning of ECEs in Ontario. We are motivated and encouraged by local and international examples of an important global movement to address compensation and recognition of ECE professionals. A number of local child care system service managers (municipalities) in Ontario are taking the lead in addressing compensation, working conditions and professional learning for ECE professionals. Wellington County is one example where their General Operating Grant strategy includes a \$20 per hour wage standard for ECEs and programme operators are required to demonstrate that they allocate 80% of their operational budget to wages and benefits. We also look towards international examples such as Australia's Big Steps campaign that has raised the issue of fair compensation for ECE professionals by empowering and mobilizing ECEs to lead the way. There are countless other campaigns underway across the World signalling that this is a global movement and we must not pass on the opportunity to seize the moment in Ontario – the future of our sector and the fulfillment of *How Does Learning Happen?* depends on it.

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