The Implementation of Full Day Kindergarten:
Exploring the Impact on Students With Exceptionalities

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explores how the recent implementation of the full day kindergarten program has impacted children with exceptionalities. The purpose of this research is to aid teachers in supporting their students in the inclusive setting and to advocate for students to get the resources and support necessary to succeed in the classroom. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two kindergarten teachers. The findings uncovered a series of themes regarding patterns that are observable in full day kindergarten classrooms. The play-based curriculum and the addition of an early childhood educator were both noted as positive additions to the kindergarten program for students with exceptionalities. Additionally, teachers reported a need for more support and resources in order to ensure the success of students with exceptionalities in the future.

Key Words: full day kindergarten, exceptionalities, teacher perspective
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

The classrooms in Ontario are continuously growing to be more and more diverse. Within this diverse group of students are a large number of students with exceptionalities (Bennett, 2009). The integration of students with exceptionalities into elementary classrooms is a growing trend in Ontario. With the recent changes to the kindergarten program in Ontario, I questioned how students with exceptionalities were impacted as schools take on the Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) approach. Children whose school success has been impacted by learning and/or behaviour exceptionalities will be the focus of this research paper.

Ontario took a step forward by implementing a universal early childhood development program through FDK in the education system. The step towards offering Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten to four and five year old children in Ontario was informed by research and successful pilot programs integrating kindergarten and childcare programs (Pascal, 2009). In 2009, Charles Pascal released his report, *With Our Best Futures in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*. The report made recommendations to move Ontario closer to an integrated, seamless early years learning system (Pascal, 2009).

Ontario’s FDK program is set apart from other early years programs because of two unique aspects. First, childcare and kindergarten programs have been joined together through a team teaching approach of a kindergarten teacher and a registered early childhood educator in the same classroom (Government of Ontario, 2010). The principle of this approach is that two professionals will collaborate together and their skills will be complementary to create a learning environment to support all students in their classroom. Second, the FDK programming requires
a play-based approach to learning and development, moving Ontario’s students away from the teacher-centered, paper and pencil style of learning (Government of Ontario, 2010).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how the implementation of the FDK program has impacted children with exceptionalities. The majority of current research evaluating the success of the program looks at kindergarten students and educators as a whole. This presented a gap in the research, presenting a need to evaluate how students with exceptionalities are doing in the FDK program. As a future educator, I believe it is our duty as educators to advocate for students who do not have a voice to advocate for themselves.

This study is important to the educational community as they work together to ensure the best outcomes for the children in our educational system. My research aims to discover what teachers believe must be done in order for students with exceptionalities to thrive and work to their full potential in the context of this new program.

1.2 Summary of the Literature Review

I began my literature review by reading Pascal’s (2009) report. Pascal introduced his paper by explaining that Canada consistently scores low on international assessment of early learning and care. He asserts that without an effective system, schools will have to work harder to help children catch up. Research has shown that it is much more difficult and costly to intervene later in life than it is to address a child’s needs in the early years (Pascal, 2009). Pascal points to the work of James Heckman and his research on early childhood development. Heckman (2012), states that early childhood is a critical time to shape productivity, as the brain is developing rapidly to build the foundations of cognitive and character skills necessary for success. In response to this growing body of evidence concerning the importance of early
childhood education, Ontario has moved towards the implementation of the FDK program in every school across Ontario.

I continued this literature review by investigating the transition into kindergarten for children with exceptionalities and their families. Through this analysis, I was able to get a better understanding of some of the concerns, challenges and successes from the perspective of both families and educators. General themes of administrative issues, lack of professional development for teachers and the importance of communication became apparent (Janus, Lefort, Cameron & Kopechanski, 2007). This led to the exploration of the theme of inclusion. Research suggests that inclusion has the potential to produce positive effects for every student in the classroom (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997). Students with exceptionalities are a growing population in Ontario schools, creating a challenge for all teachers as they strive to create an inclusive environment where all students feel accepted.

As the FDK program has only recently been introduced, the program is not without controversy. Janette Pelletier, a researcher and professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has chosen to study the full impact of the program for this reason (Pelletier, 2014). Her current longitudinal research project is examining the impact of FDK in partnership with the Region of Peel. Pelletier aims to answer the question, “is full day kindergarten working?” Her research initiative is following approximately 560 children and families from junior and senior kindergarten to grade two. Her current findings include the following positive implications of the program: team teaching improves the structure of classroom programming and engaging families, parents reported reduced overall stress and improved readiness of their children and the play-based curriculum has shown many benefits to students in the program. Building on the
research from Pelletier’s team, my research will follow to look more specifically at how the FDK program has impacted children with exceptionalities.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary goal of this study was to examine how the implementation of FDK has impacted students with exceptionalities. I explored this research question from the perspective of FDK teachers in the Greater Toronto Area. I further analyzed my main research question with the following sub questions:

1) Do teachers feel that they are able to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities?

2) What is needed in the FDK program in order for students with exceptionalities to achieve their highest level of ability?

3) How has the implementation of the full day, play-based curriculum impacted the emotional and social well coming of students with exceptionalities?

I utilized a case study approach to gain an understanding of the perspectives of kindergarten teachers. I investigated these questions through face-to-face interviews with two experienced kindergarten teachers. In selecting my participants, I required that professionals had experience working in both the FDK program and the half or alternate day program. Additionally, it was essential that each teacher had experience working with children with exceptionalities in the FDK setting. Through analysis of the literature and transcribed interviews, the present study aims to gain a thorough understanding of how the new FDK program has impacted the lives of children with exceptionalities.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

My interest in this research topic stems from my undergraduate experience at the University of Guelph in the Child, Youth and Family program. There I was introduced to many
aspects of early childhood education and care. In my fourth year, I became fascinated with the history of childcare and education. Professors who advocated from childcare and education in Canada supported me in my learning. Courses such as social policy and the history of education and care made it clear to me that there were so many benefits of creating a national childcare system. It soon became apparent that a well-designed early education and care program has the potential to meet numerous objectives. A large body of research supports that high quality early education programs are the key foundation of life-long learning for all children. Moreover, these programs are fundamental to supporting parents in employment, education and training and in their roles as parents. My colleagues and I began to question why Canada did not have an early childhood education system in place. In many people’s eyes, the implementation of the FDK was cause for celebration. I believe that FDK is a step forward for Canada in putting research into action.

My background in early childhood education has also contributed to my growing passion for advocating for children with exceptionalities. As an educator, I value the unique needs of each child and continuously ensure that the children I work with feel supported in the classroom environment. My philosophy of education began to develop during my undergraduate at the University of Guelph. There I was given the opportunity to work with professors, educators, colleagues and children who all played a role in developing my passion for advocacy in the classroom. The importance of advocacy became real for me while volunteering in the community classroom of an elementary school during my fourth year. The educators in the classroom taught me that we must advocate for our students who do not have a voice to advocate for themselves. Working with these passionate professionals was inspiring and will be something that I will remember for the rest of my life. Through both these experiences and my literature review, it
has become clear that often students with exceptionalities are not fully supported in the classroom. Evidently, these experiences bring me into the research with a bias, as I have watched children struggle to learn and work in the classroom without the support they deserve.

1.5 Overview of MTRP

This research paper contains five main chapters. In chapter one, I provided details on the study including introduction, purpose of study, research questions and background of researcher. Chapter two is a literature review wherein I provide an overview of the existing body of research about early childhood education, the transition into kindergarten, inclusion, teachers and family experiences and recent research on the new FDK program. Chapter three is a methodology that describes each step of the research study. Chapter four identifies the participants in my study and details all of my findings in accordance to the research question. Finally, chapter five closes the paper with a discussion of the study and its limitations, implications and recommendations for the future of FDK.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this study, I seek to provide insight into how the implementation of the new FDK program has impacted children with exceptionalities. In order to inform this study, I examined the current research of others’ academics in the field. As the program is still in the early stages of implementation, it is crucial that we evaluate the successes and challenges of the program. Few research studies have been conducted on the program due to the recent introduction of FDK and existing research on FDK focuses on evaluating the program as a whole. My study builds upon the foundation of current research and further unravels the implications of the program on children with exceptionalities. In addition to evaluating current research available surrounding the new FDK program, I investigate inclusion in practice. I will explore the perspectives of both teachers and families involved in the inclusion of children with exceptionalities.

2.1 Students With Exceptionalities

Students with exceptionalities are a growing population within Ontario schools (Bennett, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the term exceptional pupil refers to a child who differs from the typical child in mental characteristics, sensory abilities, communication abilities, behaviour and emotional development, and/or physical characteristics (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman & Anastasiow, 2011). In an exceptional child, these differences occur to such an extent that he or she requires either a modification of school practices or special educational services to develop his or her unique capabilities (Kirk et al., 2011). As these children are integrated into the classroom environment, I questioned how teachers felt the needs of these children were supported as the implementation of FDK began.
2.2 The Full Day Kindergarten Program

Based on advice presented in Charles Pascal’s (2009) report *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, the government of Ontario introduced FDK beginning in September 2010. In FDK classrooms, certified teachers and registered early childhood educators work together as a team to deliver a full day of inquiry, play-based learning guided by the principles set out in The Full-Day Early Learning- Kindergarten Program Draft Version. There is increasing recognition that the first few years of a child’s life are a particularly sensitive period in the process of development. The vision of the program has been informed by a large body of evidence that supports that children’s early experiences have a profound and long-lasting influence on their development and success in future grades (Government of Ontario, 2013).

National policies for the “care” and “education” of young children have developed separately in Canada. In 2009, Charles Pascal released his report and made recommendations to move Ontario closer to an integrated, seamless early years system. As the kindergarten program develops in its beginning stages it is important to consider how the integration of education and care impacts the families and children in Ontario. Charles Pascal (2009) stated that the full day program is intended to be a support for both working parents and families and those interested in returning to the workforce or in pursuit of further education. Proponents of the program argue that this will be a positive change for the majority of families; however, there is a gap in the literature in regards to how families with children with exceptionalities will be impacted. This new full day program is a big change for this group of children and I question whether children with exceptionalities are fully supported in this environment.
2.2.1 Play-Based Curriculum and Team Teaching Approach

The FDK program requires a play-based approach to learning and development. The kindergarten curriculum states that play and academic work are not distinct categories for kindergarten students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). There is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and social, physical and emotional skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The students in the program will actively explore the world around them through the process of play-based learning.

Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing of children (Ginsburg, 2009). It is a complex phenomenon that occurs naturally for most children. However, I questioned how children with exceptionalities have been impacted by the new play-based style of teaching. Children with exceptionalities may be limited in their play skills and may not have the same opportunities to play as their peers (Hamm, Mistrett, & Amy, 2006). Mastrangelo (2009) focuses specifically on children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the power of play in the classroom. She explains that these students generally experience difficulties in the social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive domains and this has an impact on their play experiences. Children with exceptionalities may have trouble initiating and sustaining play experiences, and often display delayed patterns of social interaction (Mastrangelo, 2009). However, the degree of impairment and the extent of ability is situation dependent and differ significantly from child to child. Despite this, Mastrangelo (2009) argues that there is a wide array of learning opportunities for children with exceptionalities at various play stages. By making play an integral component of every child’s daily education, then we are one step closer to improving the developmental capabilities of children with exceptionalities.
Research shows that play is essential to the learning for all children at this developmental stage. The kindergarten curriculum states that both child-initiated and teacher structured play-based learning should be integral parts of the FDK program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Mastrangelo (2009) explains that play is a bridge between teacher and student. Simply placing children with exceptionalities in an inclusive setting with a play-based curriculum does not result in the same benefits for typically developing children. This is due to the fact that during play, children with exceptionalities do not interact socially at the same rate as their peers. Therefore, it is essential that teachers support these children in expanding their repertoire of play skills and gaining the tools necessary for social integration and success (O’Neill, 2013). Adults play a vital role in facilitating play for children with exceptionalities. The teachers and early childhood educators in the room should aid the students by adapting the environment, encouraging the child to explore possibilities for play and also educating other students in the classroom about children with exceptionalities. This creates an inclusive and supportive community environment for all students. In addition, it is the job of the teachers and early childhood educators to ensure that students with exceptionalities are able to generalize the many skills that they learn during play to a variety of contexts and people outside of the classroom (Mastrangelo, 2009).

The Early Learning-Kindergarten team comprises of a Kindergarten teacher and an early childhood educator (ECE). Teachers are responsible for the long-term planning and organization of the program and the management of the classroom in addition to student learning, effective instruction, formative assessment and evaluation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Early childhood educators bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote each child’s physical, cognitive, language, emotional, social and creative
development and well-being, providing opportunities for them to contribute to formative assessment and evaluation of the children’s learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Due to the recent implementation, the impact of these two professionals in the classroom has not been studied thoroughly. My study aims to discover how the collaboration of these two professions impacts the education of children with exceptionalities.

### 2.2.2 Current Research on the Full Day Kindergarten Program

Current research on the FDK program tends to focus on the program as a whole. The main overarching question these researchers are asking is, “is Full Day Kindergarten working?” Janette Pelletier (2014) states in her research that the implementation of this new education policy has not been without controversy. The media presents arguments both “for” and “against” the FDK program (Anderson, 2014; Pedro, 2014; Pill, 2014).

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2013) commissioned research that children with two years of FDK showed greater decline in risk from Junior Kindergarten to Senior Kindergarten in several developmental areas as compared to children with one year of FDK. The report analyzed the program with two main research questions in mind. First, they wanted to determine whether children from the FDK program would show higher scores on a measure of developmental health and school readiness than those from Half Day Kindergarten programs. Second, they wanted to determine whether the FDK program would be more effective for kindergarten students in high need schools than for students in low needs schools. The findings presented results to show that FDK was successful in “leveling the academic playing field” for communities and classrooms of high needs (Year One Report, 2013). A related research study, also commissioned by the Ministry of Education, showed that the program was experiencing
“growing pains” in integrated staff teamwork, but showed a positive improvements to children’s learning and to families overall experience.

Pelletier (2014), a researcher and professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has chosen to study the full impact of the program. Her research initiative is following approximately 560 children and families from junior and senior kindergarten to grade two. The results of this research to date paints a positive picture of the implementation and impact of the FDK program overall. Staff teams are reporting professional benefits and parents are reporting reduced stress for themselves and greater readiness for their children. Children and researchers report the importance and benefits of play, as researchers observe children’s engagement and ability to regulate their behaviour during play. Pelletier (2014) believes that the new FDK program is working for children, parents and staff in ways that support healthy child and family development. Based on this foundation of research, I will continue to analyze the impacts of the new FDK program on this specific group of children as part of my study.

2.3 Inclusion in Practice

The inclusion of students with exceptionalities has stimulated great debate in education. Inclusion is a simple principal that states that children with exceptionalities should take part in regular classes and activities (Zimmerman, 2013). Inclusive education is central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies. To be truly inclusive, the environment must address three fundamental components: access, activity and variability (Winter, Bell & Dempsey, 2012). Access refers to a person’s ability to physically enter a desired location. Activity is a person’s ability to take part in an experience once access is provided. Often educators overlook that the activity component of inclusion cannot be fulfilled just by getting close to one’s peers without being able to engage in
the same activities (Winter et al., 2012). The third aspect of inclusion is variability, which refers to the ability of all persons to select from a range of options to find a personally appropriate choice. Variability is critical if we want all children to experience autonomy of thought and action (Winter et al., 2012). As educators and administration work together to ensure an inclusive environment, these will be aspects they need to consider.

There are numerous positive effects of inclusion for all students in the classroom setting including, improving communication and social skills, increasing positive peer interactions, positive educational outcomes and post school adjustment (Bennett et al., 1997). Positive effects on children without exceptionalities include development of positive attitudes and perceptions of others and positive effects to overall school performance (Bennett et al., 1997). Inclusion provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers. A supportive environment in the early years stimulates learning and reinforces the synaptic connections that enhance development (Vakil, Welton, O'Connor & Kline, 2008). Supportive environments are based on developmentally appropriate practice where children feel accepted, cared for and supported not only in their learning, but also in their physical, emotional and social well being (Vakil et al., 2008). Often placing children in a regular classroom learning with typically developing peers is considered optimum placement for these children. However, it is important to recognize that for inclusion to be effective, special education and general education practices have to be merged (Vakil et al., 2008). Accommodations and/or modifications would have to be developed to allow for meaningful participation in the classroom setting. Fundamental to the success of this group of children are the multiple individuals involved including the educators in the classroom, administration and families of the children.
2.3.1 Teacher Perspective on Inclusion

Many teachers share the fundamental value of inclusion, based on inclusion’s contributions to a sense of classroom community and on a conviction that most students will benefit in this classroom environment. A number of themes emerge when teachers are asked about what is necessary for successful inclusion. Bennett et al. (1997) identified three factors that are crucial to the success of inclusion in the classroom: attitudes, resources and curricula. Positive attitudes and cooperation among staff, trained professionals and families facilitate inclusion success. Parents often identified negative attitudes of professional staff as a barrier to successful inclusion. Bennett et al. (1997) identified teachers as the foundation for the implementation of inclusion; they recognized teacher training as the basis for inclusion as it directly relates to teacher confidence in carrying out inclusion practices. Smith and Smith (2000) surveyed a group of teachers and identified similar themes that contributed to the success of an inclusive classroom including: training, class load, support and time. Fundamentally, the success of any inclusion program revolved around administrative issues. Smith and Smith (2000) discovered that regardless of the level of teacher training, it is still necessary to consider issues of load, support and time. Evidently, knowing how to handle inclusion is necessary but not sufficient.

2.3.2 Parent Perspective on Inclusion

Parents should be included as respected and equal members of the team. Inclusion and parent involvement are considered best practice in early childhood education. Few studies have focused on the practical application of these concepts in the educational setting (Bennett et al., 2007). For parents, successful inclusion practices depend on a certain number of factors. In this study parents reported positive experiences with both inclusion and relationships with
educational professionals. This group of parents showed that in order for inclusion to be successful, they often had to advocate for their child. However, it was found that often as advocacy efforts increased, positive relationships with education professionals decreased. These findings suggest that parents who need to advocate for services may view themselves as opponents rather than valued members of the team. Janus et al. (2007) recognized that when there is a discrepancy between the educational philosophies of the family and the educational staff this has a negative impact on inclusion. Evidently, communication between the school and family is an essential component to facilitating inclusion success. Negative parent experiences are often directly related to a lack of communication between the school and the families. The theme of advocacy is very apparent in this section of the literature. Teachers, early childhood educators, administration and families must collaborate in order for inclusion to be successful.

2.4 Summary

The limited research surrounding the impact of the new FDK program present a need to further evaluate the successes and challenges of the program. Children with exceptionalities are considered a vulnerable population; therefore it is essential that we evaluate how this group of children is being supported in the FDK environment. The literature suggests that inclusion and the play-based curriculum has the power to be quite beneficial to children with exceptionalities. It is how it is implemented that impacts the success of the inclusion of children with exceptionalities into the program.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the research methodology of my study. I will begin by discussing my research approach, procedures and data collection instruments. I will follow with a description of my participant sampling, the recruitment process and a brief introduction to the participants selected for my study. I will explain the data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations relevant to my research. I will discuss the limitations and strengths of my study and conclude the chapter with a brief overview of the key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with FDK teachers. Qualitative researchers study their subjects in natural settings and are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed from their experiences (Merriam, 2014). My study investigated how the new FDK program has impacted children with exceptionalities in the inclusive classroom from the perspective of teachers. Through semi-structured interviews, I learned from teachers who have taught during the beginning stages of the program implementation.

Qualitative research was suitable for this research study as I was able to study and learn from the perspectives of teachers immersed in the new FDK program. Merriam (2014), states that qualitative research that focuses on the discovery, insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives. The educational community has the responsibility to continuously evaluate and develop
the profession. As new changes are made to the education system, we must evaluate these changes and work to improve the overall system.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

This research study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with FDK teachers. The purpose of interviewing is to learn from the lived experiences of other people and discover the meaning they make from that experience (Seidman, 2006). Interviews serve as a powerful tool in research to gain insight into the classroom setting as they give context to situations and allow participants to provide reasoning and explain events that occur in the classroom. The interview process gave my participants the opportunity to reflect on the successes and drawbacks of the program and to consider how children with exceptionalities have been impacted. The interview process provided me with stories of the lived experience of educational professionals that other methods of data collection could not have given.

3.3 Participants

This section will focus on the selection of my participants for the research study. I will explain the process and criteria for selecting my participants. I will follow with a brief description of the participants detailing their history in the educational community.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

In order to inform this study, participants were selected based on the following criteria. The first criterion was that the individual is a kindergarten teacher. As the focus of my research was on the kindergarten program, it was necessary that the experiences of my participants reflected the kindergarten classroom setting. The second criterion was that the teacher had worked in both the full day and the half-day or alternate day setting. This was important, as teachers were able to draw on past experiences and compare the experiences of children with
exceptionalities in each program. The third criterion was that teachers had children with exceptionalities in their classroom in both kindergarten programs. This was very important, as teachers were able to note specific differences for children with exceptionalities with the change in program. Teachers were required to meet all three criteria in order to be considered for participation in my research study.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

As I am immersed in a community full of educational professionals and teacher candidates, I was able to select my participants from this group. I used a combination of convenience and snowball techniques in order to select the participants for my research study. I located my first participant during practicum when the teacher I was working with recommended I interview one of the kindergarten teachers in the school. A colleague recommended my second participant to me as they had previously worked in the participant’s classroom.

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

I selected two kindergarten teachers who had many years of experience teaching kindergarten to inform this research study. Both participants had many years of experience working in the field of education and worked in classrooms other than kindergarten in the past. My first research participant, Carrie has been a kindergarten teacher for ten years. She began her kindergarten journey teaching the alternate day program. She has experience working with children with exceptionalities through her own classroom experience and through her job as a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) for six years. My second research participant, Sarah has been a kindergarten teacher for 20 years. She began her kindergarten journey teaching the half day program. In addition to her experience working in a kindergarten classroom, she also taught language-impaired children. Both participants have taken additional qualification
courses (special education part one and two) and have participated in many workshops to learn about teaching children with exceptionalities.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

As the FDK program is relatively new, there is limited literature surrounding the research topic. I conducted a literature review focusing on children with exceptionalities in early childhood education to support the beginning of the study. In addition, I consulted the research of professionals who have evaluated the Full Day program thus far.

The primary means of data collection was through semi-structured interviews with FDK teachers. The interview process provided insight concerning teacher practices, insights, and attitudes surrounding the new FDK program. The interviews were divided into five sections. I began by gathering background information about the teachers. Then, I asked questions to gain an understanding of their experiences in the kindergarten setting and their beliefs and values in relation to the kindergarten program. I concluded the interview by asking for their suggestions for future teachers and inquiring about their goals for their future as teachers and the future of the FDK program overall. Both interviews were approximately 45 minutes in duration and were conducted in person. The interviews were recorded and promptly transcribed. Both participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts before I began the next step in the research process.

After the transcription process was complete, I read the transcripts thoroughly and examined the interviews looking for themes, patterns and interesting statements my participants made. Following this stage, I interpreted the themes and reported the findings. This stage was very important as it informed my future practice as a teacher and provided suggestions for the future of the kindergarten program.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Prior to the interview process participants were given letters of informed consent, which they were required to read and sign before the interview (See Appendix A). Participants were given a copy for their own records and another copy was retained for the records of this study. Interviews were conducted at a time agreed upon by both parties and at a place selected by the participant. Participants were each given all required information regarding content, consent and confidentiality. Every effort to ensure the comfort and willingness to perform the interview of the participant was taken.

At the beginning of each interview I reviewed the research topic with each participant. Participants were informed that they have the right to refrain from answering any questions, to review or revise answers and to change their mind about the use of the data at any point during the research process. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded in order facilitate transcription. Both participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to make changes or revise any statements that were made. Member checks are crucial to the research process as they ensure credibility of the study.

All information that could compromise the anonymity of the participants was modified through the use of pseudonyms for individuals and institutions. Any individual-specific information such as specific roles on committees, courses taught was excluded or changed in order to protect the anonymity of the research participants. The final data was also carefully reviewed in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Any data collected throughout the research process was kept on my password-protected computer and backed up onto my external hard drive. There are no known risks to the
participants of my study and all precautions will be put in place in order to ensure all participants are well protected from harm.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Although my sample size was small, it was appropriate in relation to the goals of my research study and improving my own practice as a beginning teacher. The interview process gave me the opportunity to learn from a two exemplary teachers in the field. Each provided their insights and opinions, which I will share with my colleagues in the educational community in order to improve the overall FDK program. However, this small sample size means that my findings cannot be generalized to the entire kindergarten teacher population.

The interview process however was successful as I was able to hear from teachers in more depth and learn aspects of the kindergarten program that I would not have been able to obtain from other methods of data collection. The interview process provided teachers with a space to speak of matters that meant the most to them in regards to children with exceptionalities in the FDK program. This process gave the opportunity to understand the meaning that participants have constructed from their experiences.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report on the research findings derived from interviews conducted with two full day kindergarten teachers. The data from these interviews informs the overall research question, how has FDK impacted children with exceptionalities? The data has been organized into four overarching themes.

1) Participants recognized a change in perspective in both society and teaching philosophies over the course of their careers and as a result of the new FDK program.

2) Participants reported the changes to the new program assisted them in planning a program suitable for the wide range of abilities and learning styles in the classroom.

3) Participants discussed the value of having an early childhood educator in the classroom and the importance of forming a partnership between the two professionals.

4) Participants emphasized the need for resources and support in order to ensure the success of the FDK program in the future.

Each theme will be discussed and connected to current literature, with consideration of how the findings will impact the educational community.

4.1 THEME ONE: Participants reported a change in perspective in both society and in teaching philosophies.

Both participants recognized that there has been a change in societal beliefs and values over the course of their career. This change was highlighted in the perspectives of educational staff, families in the kindergarten program and children in the classroom. Participants recognized that there has been a transformation towards celebrating diversity in the classroom instead of ignoring it. They each acknowledged that this step forward has been foundational in
creating a classroom environment where students feel included and safe. Participants agreed that educational staff should teach children to interact with the diverse population of children in the classroom in order to create a safe and welcoming environment for all. In addition to this change in societal thinking, both participants reflected on the changes to the kindergarten program philosophy and how it has impacted their teaching practices. In particular, the shift towards play-based and student-centered learning has influenced their teaching practice and style.

4.1.1 The Impact of Social Change

The change in societal thinking was an evident theme in both interviews. Both participants considered the changes in thinking and discussed how this change in perspective impacted their teaching. Carrie began by discussing the kind nature of the students she has had in her class. “Kids can be so kind, without even being told they will help him, they want to include him in the group.” Carrie emphasized that kids are genuinely accepting, but recognized that teachers also have an important role to play in creating an inclusive environment. This is consistent with the literature, stating that positive attitudes are crucial to the success of inclusion (Bennett et al., 1997). Adults play an important role in facilitating an inclusive environment for children with exceptionalities.

The educators in the classroom can create an inclusive environment in many ways, such as adapting the environment, encouraging the child to explore the possibilities of play and also educating other students in the classroom about children with exceptionalities (O’Neill, 2013). Carrie put research into practice later in her career when she began talking about the differences in the classroom rather than ignoring them like she had in the past. She began to use books as a resource to teach her students that everyone is different and everyone learns in different ways. She has found that explicitly teaching this attitude has been successful. She also stressed the
importance of keeping children with exceptionalities in the classroom. Although in the past she believed in removing children from the classroom, she now believes that inclusion is best practice. It helps to familiarize the other students in the classroom with the student with exceptionalities and to help the student learn strategies to learn in the same environment as their peers. This belief is consistent with the research of Bennett et al. (1997) who assert that inclusion is beneficial to all students in the classroom.

Sarah also felt strongly about including children with exceptionalities in the classroom. In order to highlight the change in perspective, she discussed her journey of ensuring a student who was non-verbal was accepted in the classroom environment. She said the most important strategy has been to incorporate her in everything and to provide her with strategies to participate in the same activities as her peers. She argued that it is not enough to place students with exceptionalities in the classroom, teachers must provide their students with the supports and resources they need to succeed. This statement is consistent with the research of Mastrangelo (2009) who explains that simply placing children with exceptionalities in an inclusive setting is not enough. The teachers in the classroom must create learning opportunities and ensure that students with exceptionalities are able to generalize the many skills they learning during play to a variety of contexts outside of the classroom (Mastrangelo, 2009). Sarah said her main goal has been to make sure that it is socially acceptable for children with exceptionalities to be a part of the group.

Sarah also explained how she created scripts for her students in the dramatic play centre to ensure her student who was nonverbal could interact with her peers. Sarah recognized that it is her job to educate the other students in the class about the differences that exist in the
classroom, but also noted the genuine kind nature of her students. Sarah explained how children in her classroom reflected this change in societal thinking:

> Kids really are the most powerful tool. They are right at her age level, and I find they do not have the same inhibitions that adults do. They are welcoming and they accept her, they take her for who she is. They don’t see “special needs” it is just another kid their age who learns in a different way, or does not talk, or who needs more personal space.

This speaks to the importance of being a role model and teaching your students how to interact with each other. Sarah said that the strategies she implemented to include the students in her class are just “good teaching.” However, I believe that an integral part of inclusion is talking about our differences and explicitly teaching our students the importance of including everyone. Kids are so accepting, but we must explicitly teach them the skills to create a classroom that celebrates diversity.

This shift towards inclusion of children with exceptionalities is connected to the changes in attitude in our society. Research on inclusion shows the many positive benefits of inclusion including, improving communication and social skills, increasing positive peer interactions, positive educational outcomes and post school adjustment (Bennett et al., 1997). Inclusion provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers (Vakil, Welton, O’Connor & Kline, 2008). However, both the participants and research indicate that educators play a vital role in facilitating inclusion (O’Neill, 2013).

### 4.1.1 The Full Day Kindergarten Philosophy

The changes made as a result of the new FDK program had an impact on how teachers deliver their kindergarten program. One of the most important changes that both participants reflected on was the elimination of paper and pencil tasks. The change has also brought
opportunity for children to explore and interact with their peers. They agreed that the skills the students were developing as a result of these program changes were much more important and engaging in comparison to the old program. Moving away from teacher-directed learning means more time to work one-on-one with students and allowing them to focus on their own unique interests and learning styles.

Carrie compared her experience teaching the alternate day program to the full day program. She said when she changed from alternate day to full day, the whole philosophy changed. The new kindergarten document became central and she attended workshops from both the board and ministry to learn about the changes as a due to the implementation of FDK. She said one of the main changes was the shift away from worksheets and drilling skills into the students and moving towards a play-based and inquiry style of teaching. When she taught the alternate day program everything was teacher-directed and all students did the same thing each day, students were not given choice in their learning. She recognized that this was not best practice in comparison to the changes she has made to her practice today. Instead, students are now given the opportunity to choose how they want to learn. An integral component of play is that children are offered choices in their learning that reflect their developmental stage and learning style (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). A big part of the new philosophy meant that if one student was learning a concept during play, another student could be learning the same concept during snack time or recess. She explained that the program gives the children choice and flexibility in their learning. Children with exceptionalities are able to feel successful in this environment especially because they feel a sense of autonomy in the school environment (Winter et al., 2012).
The benefits of play in the early childhood setting are highlighted in numerous research articles. A main aspect of play is that children are given the opportunity to be active agents in their own learning. Children are given choice and are given the opportunity to explore the various types of learning. Play gives students with exceptionalities the opportunity to practice skills that are relevant to them in a setting where all students are invited to practice skills unique to their own learning abilities. Play allows children to be immersed in an environment that is socially acceptable for them to learn skills relevant to them. In contrast to the old kindergarten program where students were all doing the same activities, there was little opportunity for differentiation. Students should be active parts of their learning and teachers play an important role in allowing this to happen. Teachers should provide opportunities for choice and encourage their students to make decisions about how they learn best. Most importantly, they need to create opportunities for them to pursue their own interests and practice their skills in a variety of ways. It is the responsibility of the teacher to cater to different learning styles and encourage creative expression in learning. This reflects the variability component of inclusion, referring to the ability of all students to select from a range of options to find a personally appropriate choice. Variability is critical if we want all children to experience autonomy of thought and action (Winter et al., 2012).

Sarah highlighted that one of the main drawbacks of the FDK program is that her students were often fatigued by the end of the day. She explained that when her students are confined to a small space all day, this has a negative impact on students’ ability to learn. She argued that students’ need to spend time in different environments, instead of staying in the classroom all day. Additionally, both participants had students in the classroom who left during the day to participate in therapy or ABA training. They stated that those students would not get
the same benefits from the FDK program and leaving to get those services was critical to their success.

4.2 THEME TWO: Participants reported that the new program supported them as they strived to play for a wide range of abilities and learning styles in their classrooms.

While discussing differentiation in the FDK setting, my participants reflected on how many of the changes they made to support students with exceptionalities often benefited other students in the class as well. In addition, there was a strong theme in the interviews examining how the new play-based curriculum makes the differentiation process easier for educators. They reflected on the different learning styles and abilities in the classroom, and how they are better able to meet the needs of everyone in the classroom.

4.2.1 Essential For Some, Good For All

Carrie began the discussion around differentiation with an interesting quote, “essential for some, good for all.” As she explained the many strategies she had implemented specifically with students with exceptionalities in mind, she mentioned that many other students in her class also benefited from these strategies as well. For example, visual schedules are a tool Carrie originally implemented for a student with autism but they are now an integral component of her classroom. She recognized that many students were using the schedule and chose to implement it into her classroom for all students. As many of the students in her class cannot read, the visual schedule served as a positive addition to the classroom to help all students who required reminders or a sense of routine. In addition, she mentioned that warnings for transition, breaking down tasks into small steps (chunking), and preferential seating are all strategies she noticed worked for many students. Sarah noticed similar patterns in her own teaching practice. She also created the visual schedule for one student in particular and noticed that many of the students in her class
would utilize it throughout the day. Vakil et al. (2008) asserts that inclusion provides a supportive learning environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers. Although, research indicates that in order for inclusion to be successful, special education and general education practices have to be merged (Vakil et al., 2008).

Often differentiation is considered simply “good teaching.” Sarah said that she has always been changing her instruction to meet the needs of each unique child and argued that if she wasn’t then she wouldn’t be doing her job. Often teaching requires trial and error to discover what students need to be successful in the classroom. Teachers need to be flexible and understand that strategies that worked for one student may not be suitable for another, and strategies that worked yesterday may not work today. This highlights the importance of positive relationships and getting to know your students and their families (Janus et al., 2007). Students will have their own unique needs, interests, abilities and learning styles. It is the responsibility of the teacher to understand the diversity in their classroom and plan activities accordingly.

4.2.2 Differentiation and the Play-Based Curriculum

A strong theme in the data was that the new play-based curriculum allows for educators to differentiate for the wide range of abilities and learning styles in the classroom. Both participants emphasized that the changes to the program provided more opportunities for their students to have choice and voice in their learning. The new kindergarten curriculum states that play provides students with a variety of opportunities that reflect their developmental stage and ability (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Play presented additional opportunities for students to feel successful and for their needs to be met.

Carrie said, “Full day kindergarten is probably the best thing that could have happened for children with exceptionalities.” She explained that the new play-based program and
philosophy allows her to differentiate and accommodate for the wide variety of needs in the classroom much more efficiently. She explained that the play-based program supports the unique interests of every student, and provides students with exceptionalities a chance to be successful and explore an area they feel comfortable with. She commented on how she can have both a student with autism in her class and a student she suspects is gifted, and each will still get the opportunities to learn at their level. Carrie expressed this opinion about FDK and differentiation:

The big thing about full day kindergarten is though they aren’t doing the same thing as everybody else, while they are. Somebody could be learning about patterns by stringing beads. Somebody could be learning about patterns because they noticed at the snack table that they were sitting boy, girl, boy, girl pattern. Another student could learn about patterns while playing with play-dough. Gone are the days where they all sit and colour a shirt with stripes to make a colour pattern, they all find their own way to learn a concept that suits their learning style and needs.

The play-based curriculum provides high achieving students with opportunities to research and read information from a variety of texts, while at the same time struggling learners can gather information about the same concept with a hands on approach. This concept is highlighted in the research of Winter et al. (2012) who argues that a major component of inclusion is providing a variety of opportunities at various levels. The kindergarten environment must support play experiences that are matched to children’s developmental levels and are also individually appropriate (Winter et al., 2012). Therefore, educators must have access to and provide a variety of play materials to offer a variety of active learning experiences (Winter et al., 2012).
Sarah explained that play has been a strong component of her kindergarten program even prior to the implementation of full day kindergarten. However, she agrees that play provides students with exceptionalities opportunities to practice the same concepts but in a suitable way that will support their learning and ensure success. Sarah said, “with play-based learning you are always adjusting to their needs and what they can handle and if you are not adjusting then you are not doing your job.” Sarah explained:

It is important that she is playing with her peers, but the task is being adjusted appropriately. For example, because she doesn’t have the language, it is just a little bit harder when they are interacting say in the drama centre. They try to include her, so we provided the students with a script in order to get the reciprocating action from her. So the kids are playing, and at the same time they are helping her practice her social skills.

This example also reflects the importance of creating opportunities for students with exceptionalities that they will be able to generalize into a variety of contexts as presented in the research of Mastrangelo (2009). Both of participants agreed that inclusion is the best way to support students with exceptionalities in the play-based kindergarten program. Keeping them in the classroom, and providing students with the support and resources they need in order to succeed is fundamental to their success.

Differentiated instruction reflects Howard Gardner’s theory that students learn through various intelligences (Morgan, 2014). Using a variety of intelligences when providing instruction is important because different students learn in different ways and through many intelligences (Morgan, 2014). When teachers allow learners to solve problems and explore their learning through the learners’ preferred intelligence, they provide scaffolding and create more opportunities for their students to be successful (Morgan, 2014). Both of my participants
provided a variety of learning opportunities for their students. They argued that the play-based curriculum helps to support the variety of learning styles in their classrooms. They made sure to give their students’ choice and voice in order for them to feel successful in the classroom environment. This is foundational to the success of students with exceptionalities, teachers must provide them with opportunities that are unique to them and will support them at their level.

4.3 THEME THREE: Participants discussed the value of having an early childhood educator in the classroom and the importance of forming a partnership between the two professionals.

Both participants discussed how the introduction of the early childhood educator was a positive addition to the kindergarten program. However, both participants emphasizes that although they had a strong partnership with their teaching partner, this is not always the case. They agreed that the two educational backgrounds of the professionals complimented each other and helped to create the optimal environment for their students.

4.3.1 The Collaboration of Two Education Systems

Both of my participants remarked that the collaboration of two professionals has been a positive addition to the kindergarten program. Each stated that having a professional whose education focuses on the early years in the classroom is an asset. The early childhood educator brings a different set of skills and knowledge into the classroom. This is consistent with the kindergarten curriculum document, which states that Early Childhood Educators will bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote each child’s physical, cognitive, language, emotional and social development and wellbeing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Both participants explained that they are interchangeable, and there is a sense of equality in the classroom between the two professionals.
Carrie recalled her own experience in teachers college and reflected on how she was not required to take any early childhood development courses. She discussed how the focus of her education was on curriculum and how to teach instead. Further, she explained the kindergarten was not a focus in her schooling and was in fact viewed as unimportant. She explained that many teachers do not have a deep understanding of early childhood education unless they have taken specific courses or additional qualifications in that area. As early childhood development was not a focus in teacher education, having a professional who specializes in the field is an asset to the program (Pelletier, 2014). Additionally, Carrie explained how the early childhood educator brings in new ideas and research into the classroom context. Carrie worked with an early childhood educator whose research focus was on nature-based learning, and brought this new perspective into the classroom. In addition, the early childhood educator she currently works with brings in research articles with an early childhood educator lens for her to read. They consistently work together to further their professional learning.

Sarah agreed that the introduction of the early childhood educator to the kindergarten program was positive. She explained that there is a child in her classroom that is developmentally at a younger level than the rest of her class. The early childhood educator in her class has experience with working with young children and provided insight on working with children at a young developmental level. She was able to come up with many ideas and activities that would be appropriate for that child. She explained that having a professional coming with the early childhood lens was an asset to the program.

The purpose of having an early childhood educator in the classroom according to the Ministry of Education (2010) is that they bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote each child’s physical, cognitive, language, emotional, social
and creative development. The vision of the program was to create an environment where team members’ skills come together to create a nurturing and stimulating learning environment to support all unique learning needs. When teams form a co-teacher relationship, the goal of the program is often met. Both of my participants felt that their program aligned with the vision and agreed that having an early childhood educator in the classroom was a positive addition to the program.

4.3.2 The Importance of Teaching as a Team

Although both of my participants felt they had a strong relationship with their early childhood educator, both recognized that this is not always be the case. The relationship can be compared to an “arranged marriage” and there is a possibility that the two professionals do not compliment each other in the classroom environment. Both participants identified that teachers and early childhood educators must work together as a team in order for the team-teaching approach to be effective.

Carrie and Sarah explained that having a second person in the classroom improves the overall learning environment. They explained that it makes it easier for them to work with small groups and provide their students with many more learning opportunities because there is an extra set of hands, ears, and eyes in the classroom. Carrie expressed the importance of working with the early childhood educator and ensuring they are partners. She felt strongly that a teacher should never treat their early childhood educator as an assistant, but recognized that this does happen. “We are interchangeable, sometimes she works with the children who need extra support and sometimes I do. She doesn’t have a specific role, we are a partnership.”

The FDK program quality depends on the relationship between the two professionals. In early years classrooms, teamwork often occurs in either a hierarchical or a co-teacher
relationship (Gibson & Pelletier, 2012). In hierarchical relationships, one teacher acts as the lead teacher and the other takes on an assistant role. In a co-teacher relationship, both educators equally share the classroom responsibilities. Increased collaboration between professionals is linked to greater program quality (Gibson & Pelletier, 2012). Gibson and Pelletier (2012) surveyed teaching teams and found that many teaching partners experience a hierarchal approach and the early childhood educators feel as though they are the assistants in the classroom. This information is important for all teachers who work with another professional. The research shows that program quality depends on the relationship structure in the classroom, so teachers and early childhood educators need to strive to work as co-partners.

4.4 THEME FOUR: Participants emphasized the need for resources and support in order to ensure the success of the full day program in the future.

Both of my participants had number of recommendations for the future of the program. Each provided examples from their practice to highlight the importance of some of their suggestions for the future. Their suggestions included a need for more support and resources to ensure the success of all children in their classroom.

4.4.1 A Need For More Educational Assistants

A strong concern among my participants was a need for classroom support. Both stated that they felt that there was a lack of support due to the low number of educational assistants in the system. My participants stressed that there was need for professionals who specialize in working with children with exceptionalities. They mentioned that the educators in the full day program are often stretched as far as they can go, and at times it can be draining. This is directly linked to the research of Smith and Smith (2000) stating that regardless of teacher level of
training, it is necessary to consider issues of load, support and time. Knowing how to handle inclusion is necessary but not sufficient (Smith & Smith, 2000).

Carrie believes that there are not enough educational workers in the system. She said that not only is it great to have someone be there for extra support, but often they are needed in order to keep the students in the classroom safe. “They are cutting back all the time. If you have a student that will run, or a student with some kind of fixation like opening and shutting doors or pressing buttons, you need a third person to keep them safe.” Carrie also explained a situation in another class, where a student would throw things to the point where the teachers in the classroom had to wear protective gear. Unfortunately, this student did not have an educational assistant with him, and that had a huge impact on the safety of the classroom.

Sarah also expressed her concern about the lack of educational assistants in the system. She explained that when there is no educational assistant support for students with exceptionalities, it becomes her responsibility to troubleshoot with her early childhood educator. “We are constantly putting out fires and I find it takes away from the other children because myself and my early childhood educator are trying to work with other students, but we need to be watching him at the same time. It is really hard on us, and I think it’s also really hard on the kids.” Sarah explained that without that support, the students in the classroom are in an environment that is not conducive for learning.

Often placing children with exceptionalities in a classroom with their peers is considered the optimal placement for these children. However, it is essential that the educational community recognize that for inclusion to be successful, special education and general education practices have to be merged (Vakil et al., 2008). Fundamental to the success of children with exceptionalities are the multiple individuals involved including the educators in the classroom.
If teachers do not feel supported in the classroom, they will be unable to provide the optimal environment for all of their students. Inclusion can only be successful when educators have the support to provide the needs of students with exceptionalities (Smith & Smith, 2010).

**4.4.2 The Need For More Professional Support**

In addition to the lack of educational assistant support, both participants felt that there was a strong need for other professional support in the classroom. The education teachers receive in teachers college, workshops and additional qualification courses may not be sufficient to meet the unique needs in their classrooms. Many teachers require the support of specialized professionals in order for students with exceptionalities to be successful in the kindergarten environment.

Carrie discussed the benefits of having various professionals visit her classroom to support her and her students with exceptionalities. She discussed how the speech-language pathologist came into the classroom to support one of her students. They worked together as a team to introduce an augmentative speech program on an iPad to a student with a communicative disorder. They used the program to communicate with the student and were successful with a claim to get the device for the student. Carrie also mentioned that a student in her class does not attend the full day because he attended ABA training outside of the school.

Sarah felt strongly about the lack of support she receives in her classroom. She felt that she needs a lot more support from head office and the board in order for her program to be successful. Sarah explained:

I’m creating programming with the educational assistant and the early childhood educator. We are creating the programming, and it is not our forte, we are not trained in that area and we create the program from the teaching perspective. None of the three of
us are specialists in fine motor or gross motor, but we come up with activities to support her based on our knowledge. I think there is a lack of support providing us the help and the support we need.

She explained that often parents have to arrange their own private services because the board does not provide them with the appropriate support they need. Further, Sarah was concerned because when professionals do come to provide suggestions, they are often unrealistic and impractical to a class of 30 students. Janus et al. (2007) explained that many parents reported having a negative experience in the inclusive setting because they often had to advocate for their children to get the services they need.

This theme is closely connected to the previous. Students with exceptionalities deserve to be included in the classroom setting. Winter et al. (2012) explain that inclusion requires that all students are able to participate in the activities planned. Simply providing students with a space to participate in similar activities does not been inclusion is successful. Inclusion can only be considered successful if teachers feel that they are given the support and resources they need (Winter et al., 2012).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter reported the research findings and provided supporting quotes from two research participants. The data was organized into four overarching themes in order to answer my overall research question, how has FDK impacted students with exceptionalities? The first theme discussed that there has been a change in perspective in both society and teaching philosophies over the course of their careers and as a result of the new FDK program. Participants reflected on how their practice has evolved due to both changes in societal thinking and to the kindergarten program philosophy. The second theme considered how the changes to
the kindergarten program have assisted teachers in planning a program for the wide range of abilities and learning styles in the classroom. Participants agreed that differentiation was more practical because of the play-based style of the program. The third theme highlighted the value of having an early childhood educator in the classroom and the importance of forming a partnership between the two educational professionals. The fourth and final theme discussed the need for resources and support in order to meet the needs of all students in the FDK program. In the last and final chapter of this study, I will discuss the implications of the research. Further, I will provide suggestions for the future of the FDK program and discuss important areas for further research in the field.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

The present study was designed to learn more about the FDK program and discover how the recent implementation has impacted students with exceptionalities. The findings serve to support existing literature connected to inclusion and the FDK program overall and to specifically tell more about the experiences of children with exceptionalities as a result of the recent changes to kindergarten in Ontario. This chapter summarizes the research findings, highlights the implications for various stakeholders, provides recommendations for the future of FDK, and suggests directions for future research.

5.1 Overview of the Key Findings and Their Significance

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of the FDK program and how children with exceptionalities have been impacted by recent changes. Following interviews with two kindergarten teachers, a thorough analysis revealed four important themes. These include:

1) Participants recognized a change in perspective in both society and teaching philosophies over the course of their careers and as a result of the new FDK program.

2) Participants reported the changes to the new program assisted them in planning a program suitable for the wide range of abilities and learning styles in the classroom.

3) Participants discussed the value of having an early childhood educator in the classroom and the importance of forming a partnership between the two professionals.

4) Participants emphasized the need for resources and support in order to ensure the success of the FDK program in the future.
The first theme illustrated how changing societal views and values and changes in policy impact the educational system and teacher instruction. Participants reflected on how their teaching instruction has evolved to be more inclusive and supportive of the diversity that exists in Ontario classrooms today. This theme emphasizes the significant role of the educator in creating a positive and inclusive learning community for their students.

The second theme illustrated how the FDK program aided teachers in differentiating for the wide range of abilities and learning styles in their classrooms. Participants acknowledged that the play-based curriculum has provided students with a variety of opportunities to practice skills in ways that the previous program was not providing. This theme serves as a reminder to educators to continuously evaluate their programming to determine if they are meeting the needs of all students in the classroom.

The third theme illustrated the advantages of having an early childhood educator in the kindergarten classroom. Participants communicated the positive implications of having an educational professional with a different knowledge base to support the learners in the classroom. This highlights the importance of educational professionals collaborating and sharing their expertise.

The fourth theme illustrated that in order for the FDK program to be truly successful for children with exceptionalities, a number of resources and supports must be put in place. Participants expressed their concerns about the lack of support and resources and how this impacts students with exceptionalities. This theme calls for a re-evaluation of inclusion and a reminder that for inclusion to be successful special education and general education practices must be merged.
5.2 Implications

The present study has important implications for educational reform. This study should serve as a reminder to policymakers to evaluate how inclusion is carried out in the educational system. Children’s early experiences have a profound and long-lasting influence on their development and future success. Consequently, children with exceptionalities are entitled to adequate support to achieve their maximum potential. Consistent with the conclusions of Vakil et al. (2008), inclusion can only be successful when special education practices are incorporated into the general classroom. The present study also provides insight into the importance of collaborating with educational professionals to expand the possibilities of inclusion in FDK. Linked to the conclusions of Bennett et al. (1997) positive attitudes and collaboration among professionals are critical to the facilitation of successful inclusion.

The present study also has two specific implications for teachers working with students with exceptionalities in the FDK setting. First, this research study suggests that teachers graduating from teacher education programs are unprepared to support the wide range of exceptionalities in the classroom. Both participants explained that although they may have years of experience in the classroom and have attended professional development workshops to learn more about the needs of their students, it is unrealistic to assume teachers are experts on all children who are exceptional. Further, this indicates that teachers are not receiving adequate support from professionals who specialize in the field of special needs. Parents often have to advocate for their children to get the support their children deserve, and many times utilize services outside of the school system. These findings are consistent with the research of Smith and Smith (2000) who assert that knowing how to handle inclusion is necessary but not
sufficient. Teachers are not receiving the support they need in their classrooms to include students with exceptionalities.

Second, this research study indicates that the play-based curriculum is a step towards eliminating barriers to inclusion in the kindergarten setting. Both participants highlighted that the play-based curriculum allows for differentiation and many new opportunities for different learning styles that were not possible in the previous kindergarten setting. The play-based curriculum gives children the opportunity to explore their passions and interests in a way that is suitable for their style of learning. Student choice and voice were central in both participants’ classrooms, and each recognized the importance of considering each student as an individual. These findings are consistent with the research of Mastrangelo (2009) who asserts that there is a wide array of learning opportunities for children with exceptionalities at various play stages.

Third, this study indicates that early childhood educators serve as a positive addition to the kindergarten program. Both participants reflected on the benefits of having a different perspective and extra support in the classroom. Early childhood educators bring a focus on age-appropriate program planning to facilitate experiences that promote child development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Additionally, having two educators in the classroom is beneficial to the learning environment as students get more one-on-one support compared to programs with a single teacher in the classroom.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications from the present student point specifically to several recommendations for the educational community. Three recommendations will be outlined below:
1) Special education courses should be mandatory in pre-service teacher education programs and administrators should provide opportunities for further professional development in special education.

2) Educational professionals who specialize in special education should be made more accessible to teachers to support children with exceptionalities in the classroom.

3) Full day kindergarten teachers should attend workshops on play-based learning to ensure children gain maximum benefit from the program.

The participants in this research study felt that they did not have the knowledge base to support the wide range of exceptionalities in the classroom. Both participants felt that their pre-service teacher education programs did not adequately prepare them to support the diverse group of abilities and learning styles that they work with each day. Teachers cannot be expected to be experts on every exceptionality, however should be required to continuously learn and develop their practice to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. This recommendation calls for administrators to create opportunities for the teachers in their schools to further develop their practice and collaborate with each other to learn from one another’s’ expertise.

The second recommendation is linked to the reality that teachers are unable to be experts on all special needs. Many teachers require the support of specialized professionals in order for students with exceptionalities to be successful in the kindergarten environment. School boards need to create opportunities for specialized professionals to support teachers as they strive to create an inclusive environment for all students. In addition, both participants felt that educational assistants are necessary to facilitate successful inclusion. There are fewer and fewer educational assistants in the school system, despite a high need for them in classrooms.
Additionally, participants both felt that they were implementing the play-based curriculum in a manner that supported all students in the classroom. However, they recognized that teachers did not receive training on how to implement the changes made to the kindergarten program. If the play-based curriculum is so successful in creating a variety of opportunities for the range of abilities and learning styles, it is essential that every teacher understand play and inquiry-based learning.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Inasmuch as the present study has served to expand upon the current literature, it has also highlighted the need for further study. Due to the small sample size of the study, the findings in this study cannot be representative of the beliefs and practices of all educators teaching FDK. A study could be conducted with a larger sample size to gain more conclusive findings regarding the topic of children with exceptionalities in the FDK program. Longitudinal studies on the impact of FDK would be valuable in determining the impact of the FDK program on children with exceptionalities.

Further, the role of the early childhood educator was a strong theme in this research. Further research could examine how early childhood educators have influenced the development of children with exceptionalities in FDK. Both participants in my study were kindergarten teachers and gave perspectives from the perspective of elementary teachers. However, early childhood educators take on a different lens, and would provide additional insight into the FDK program. As early childhood educators are a fundamental component of the FDK program, it is essential that research investigate their perspective additionally.

The participants in my study did not focus children who are gifted when speaking about children who are exceptional. Current research often centers on students who require additional
support and does not highlight the impacts of students who are gifted. Further research should focus on how students who are gifted have been impacted by recent changes to the kindergarten program in Ontario.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The present study examined the impact of FDK on children with exceptionalities. Early childhood is a crucial stage in life in terms of a child’s development. Therefore, this research is important to the educational community as they continue to analyze the FDK program in its beginning stages. Due to the recent implementation of the program, it was essential to evaluate the outcomes of the program. This research study revealed that the FDK program has created both positive and negative outcomes for children with exceptionalities. My overarching research question asked whether or not students with exceptionalities are supported in the new full day kindergarten program. I believe the answer to this question is not yet, there is still work that needs to be done in order for students with exceptionalities to be fully supported. Teachers contend that the play-based curriculum has aided them in the differentiation process, and allowed for many additional opportunities for students in the classroom. Further, the addition of an early childhood educator in the classroom was reported as a positive experience for both participants. The early childhood educators bring forward new ideas, perspectives and additional support in the classroom. However, despite these positive additions to the program, FDK still requires additional support and resources in order for the inclusion to truly be successful.
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Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Tuesday, October 6, 2015

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Kate Curley and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how the new full day kindergarten program has impacted children with exceptionalities in the classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience working with children with exceptionalities in the kindergarten setting and would be willing to share their experiences. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into my study.

Your participation in this research will involve one 30-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to my research data will be my course instructor Ken McNeilly. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you
have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question.

I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. This copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Kate Curley
Course Instructor: Ken McNeilly
Contact Information: kenneth.mcneilly@utoronto.ca

**Consent Form**

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kate Curley and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ___________________________________________________

Name: (printed) _________________________________________________

Date: _________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction to the Interview

Thank you very much for participating in my research study. Before we begin we will review the aim of my research study and confidentiality and consent. The goal of my research is to learn how the implementation of Full Day Kindergarten has impacted children with exceptionalities in the classroom. I will ask you a series of 14 questions focusing on your background information, your experience in the kindergarten setting and your suggestions and goals for the future in regards to this topic. I also want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How many years have you been a teacher?
2. What experiences or background led you to becoming a kindergarten teacher?
3. What experience and/or qualifications do you have working with children with exceptionalities?

Teacher Practices

4. What strategies do you use to ensure children with exceptionalities are integrated in your classroom?
5. Can you give an example from your practice that you feel has been successful in integrating children with exceptionalities?
6. How has the implementation of the play-based curriculum impacted children with exceptionalities in your classroom?

7. What is the difference in the social and emotional well being of children with exceptionalities in the half day vs. the full day program?

8. What effect has the introduction of an Early Childhood Educator had on children with exceptionalities?

Beliefs and Values

9. What resources or supports do you feel are necessary to ensure the success of children with exceptionalities in your classroom?

10. What professional development courses do you think teachers need in order for children with exceptionalities to achieve their highest level of ability?

Influencing Factors

11. Have you faced any obstacles or challenges with the implementation of full day kindergarten with regards to children with exceptionalities?

12. Have you received any feedback from parents of children with exceptionalities about the full day program that has influenced your teaching practice today?

Next Steps

13. What goals do you have for the future of your kindergarten program in regards to children with exceptionalities?

14. What advice would you give to a beginning teacher so that they were able to support all children in their kindergarten classroom?