

# DOES EXPANDING EDUCATION “SCHOOLIFY” EARLY DEVELOPMENT?



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Canada is moving toward expanding education to include four-year-olds. Nova Scotia, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories have strong models in place, while Quebec is phasing it in. Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan have targeted programs that are raising interest. The research behind the developmental success of junior kindergarten is well established, as is the economic rationale. As a bonus, removing four-year-olds from regulated child care is a fast route toward space expansion.

The trend is not without concern. In early child education conversations, there is apprehension that four-year-olds in schools result in a too early focus on academics, that it “schoolifies” early learning. Conversations in primary education hold the opposite concern that play-based learning is a missed opportunity to “teach school readiness” skills.

Researchers from the highly respected National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) have waded into this debate. The NIEER team investigated the extent to which practices considered developmentally appropriate and inappropriate varied between publicly-funded schools and private centres and whether such approaches led to the “academization” of the curriculum. In other words, does junior kindergarten “schoolify” early learning?

Like Canada, just over half of U.S. four-year-old children are enrolled in preschool, with a trend toward public school delivery. NIEER reviewed previous research that leans toward better practices in public education programs amidst a growing call from primary educators for a “school readiness” or “academization” focus.” They then identified five pedagogical practices widely identified as developmentally appropriate in play-based learning and two that are seen as inappropriate and overly academic: flashcards and worksheets.

Researchers used U.S. data from a 2010 survey of 2,664 preschool teachers matched with interviews with a randomized sample of educators from 5,000 centres to compare the frequency of use of these seven practices in publicly-funded junior kindergarten, federally-funded Head Start and private, fee-based programs. They controlled for factors such as variations in funding, community, race, training levels of educators, policies, leadership, etc. Their findings are compelling.

Preschool teachers in all programs reported a mix of practices related to play-based, child-centred, academic drill, and whole-group approaches to learning and teaching. Some practices were remarkably uniform across all programs and consistent with play-based early learning. In all centres, appropriate play-based learning was dominant. However, NIEER found that teachers in private programs reported more academic and less child-centred approaches on every measure, including whole group time and integrating academic learning across subject areas. Particularly strong differences were noted in private centres’ frequent use of flashcards and worksheets, the two practices which are highly indicative of inappropriate practice.

NIEER’s conclusions are compelling because of the team’s stature and the scope and depth of the research. While they surmise that there is no evidence of an academic push in preschool, they caution that public education, with its stronger focus on standardized and monitored public policies, is better positioned to guard against it. These findings join the chorus of emerging research on the appropriateness of expanding public education to include younger children and its lasting impact on developmental outcomes.