

**Ontario Kindergarten Teachers' Social Media Discussions  
About Full Day Kindergarten**  
**Discussions, sur les médias sociaux, des enseignants ontariens  
à la maternelle à propos de la maternelle à temps plein**

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Article abstract

This exploratory netnographic study describes how a sample of Ontario kindergarten teachers perceives the new Ontario Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) curriculum. Discussions from teacher message boards, the comment sections of online news articles, and interviews with kindergarten teachers were analyzed and coded using a qualitative approach. Analysis revealed three major themes: 1) Class size concerns, 2) Team teaching concerns, and 3) Play-based curriculum concerns. Results are in broad agreement with those reported in existing research into Ontario's FDK initiative. Findings highlight the need for further research with educators involved in Ontario's FDK and also contribute to the burgeoning field of netnography research. Suggestions for future research and practice are included.

# ONTARIO KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' SOCIAL MEDIA DISCUSSIONS ABOUT FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN

MEGHAN LYNCH *University of Toronto*

**ABSTRACT.** This exploratory netnographic study describes how a sample of Ontario kindergarten teachers perceives the new Ontario Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) curriculum. Discussions from teacher message boards, the comment sections of online news articles, and interviews with kindergarten teachers were analyzed and coded using a qualitative approach. Analysis revealed three major themes: 1) Class size concerns, 2) Team teaching concerns, and 3) Play-based curriculum concerns. Results are in broad agreement with those reported in existing research into Ontario's FDK initiative. Findings highlight the need for further research with educators involved in Ontario's FDK and also contribute to the burgeoning field of netnography research. Suggestions for future research and practice are included.

## DISCUSSIONS, SUR LES MÉDIAS SOCIAUX, DES ENSEIGNANTS ONTARIENS À LA MATERNELLE À PROPOS DE LA MATERNELLE À TEMPS PLEIN

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cette recherche exploratoire et netnographique décrit la manière dont un échantillon d'enseignants ontariens travaillant à la maternelle perçoivent le nouveau programme de maternelle et jardins d'enfants à temps plein (MJTP). Des discussions relevées sur des babillards électroniques, les sections commentaires d'articles de nouvelles en ligne et des entrevues effectuées auprès d'enseignants à la maternelle ont été analysées et codées en utilisant une approche qualitative. Ces analyses ont révélées trois axes majeures de préoccupations: 1) celles relatives à la taille des groupes, 2) celles concernant l'enseignement en équipe et 3) celles portant sur le programme d'apprentissage axé sur le jeu. Les résultats de l'étude concordent avec ceux signalés par les projets de recherches pilotés par le gouvernement de l'Ontario dans le cadre du projet de MJTP. Ceux-ci soulignent le besoin de mener de plus amples recherches auprès des enseignants impliqués dans le projet ontarien de MJTP et contribuent également au domaine naissant de la recherche netnographique. Des suggestions pour des projets de recherche futurs et pour la pratique sont également formulées.

## INTRODUCTION

The government of Ontario recently established a comprehensive early learning system that includes a full-day kindergarten (FDK) program (Pascal, 2009). In September 2010, the first group of four- and five-year-old children in Ontario participated in the FDK format (Grieve, 2012b). Formerly, children attended kindergarten on alternating days or half-days in Ontario schools (Tozer, 2012). In addition to the switch to a full-day format, the new FDK curriculum introduced a play-based approach to learning and a teaching team involving a kindergarten teacher and an early childhood educator (ECE) working together in the classroom (Pascal, 2009). Kindergarten teachers have training in the broader elementary school curriculum and student assessment (Gibson & Pelletier, 2012). On the other hand, ECEs have training specifically in the physical, emotional, social, and creative development of young children. Additionally, previous to the FDK program, ECEs worked in settings other than school classrooms, such as childcare centres (Goulden, 2012; Pascal, 2009). To work in FDK classrooms, teachers must be registered with the Ontario College of Teachers and have a 3-year post-secondary degree in addition to a 1-year teaching certificate, whereas ECEs must be registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators and have completed a 2-year college diploma in early childhood education (Gibson & Pelletier, 2012). The official FDK policy states that the teacher and ECE are equal partners in the kindergarten classroom (Gananathan, 2011). However, a number of challenges have risen when these partnerships are put in practice (Corter et al., 2007; Ryan & Date, 2012). Concerns with cooperation, respect, conflict resolution, pedagogical differences, practical matters, sharing of space and resources, as well as communication problems between teachers and ECEs have all been reported (Gananathan, 2011; Goulden, 2012). The change to a play-based curriculum adds to the challenges for educators in Ontario's FDKs (Tozer, 2012). Teachers and ECEs have described an inability to fully implement the play-based program, and they have described misconceptions about play-based teaching, such as that explicit instruction has no role in play-based learning (Tozer, 2012). Given the newness of the program, research examining the FDK program has just begun, and the present study intends to add to this growing area of study.

### *Alternative data sources for understanding teachers' perspectives*

Gaining an understanding of teachers' perspectives can play a major role in the success of a new educational initiative. An alternative to traditional methods (i.e., interviews, focus groups) has been found in social media data (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in research examining social media discussions, such as online message boards, blogs, and news forums (Hadert & Rodham, 2008; Henrich & Holmes, 2011; Moorhead et al., 2013; White & Dorman, 2001). Teachers have increasingly been participating in social media discussions to discuss their concerns

regarding educational policies (Reichman & Atzi, 2012; Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012). Message boards have been described as an especially crucial outlet for teachers as they provide emotional support and a sense of community to this group of professionals who may not find it elsewhere due to time, scheduling, and geographical issues (Hur & Brush, 2009; Kidd, 2013; Nicolson & Bond, 2003). As an effect of perceived limitations on teachers' freedom of speech respecting educational policies, online discussions are viewed as enabling teachers to discuss their opinions with a wider range of teachers than those in their immediate environments; this benefit cannot be underestimated as teachers have described feeling isolated from other teachers who might share their views (Hur & Brush, 2009; Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012).

In addition to message board discussions, another avenue of social media discussions worth examining is online news article comments. Unlike traditional print news articles, online news articles feature interactivity through a comments section that allows readers to post comments at the end of the article, and this feature has been found to allow for diverse opinions (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). By examining the discussions posted in response to news articles on the H1N1 vaccine, Henrich and Holmes (2011) discovered that the online themes were consistent with the findings from surveys and focus groups, and the authors conclude that online discussions provide reliable sources of data. Yet, in spite of such advantages, teachers' social media discussions have remained an understudied area of education research (Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012). Moreover, to date, the limited educational social media research has focused on American teachers and educational policies (Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012). Consequently what is currently needed is research on Canadian teachers' social media discussions.

## **OBJECTIVE**

While many individuals play important roles in the successful implementation of educational initiatives, such as new curricula, teachers play a central role to successful implementation (Christou, Eliophotou-Menon, & Philippou, 2004; Fullan, 2007). Previous research into Ontario's FDK has focused mainly on the partnership between the kindergarten teacher and the ECE using traditional methods such as interviews and focus groups (Katz & Dack, 2011; Gananathan, 2011; Goulden, 2012; Marsh, 2011; Tozer, 2012). However, there currently exists a large presence of kindergarten teachers discussing challenges they face in their working lives on social media. Thus, the objective of the present study was to use a netnographic approach. Netnography involves researchers observing social media discussions in their 'naturalistic', online settings and/or using social media actively to elicit participants in product and services design, and will be further described in the following research design section. This research approach was considered appropriate to explore Ontario kindergarten teachers' discussions about their province's new FDK

program in two different types of social media: message boards and news article comments sections. Three themes were identified from this analysis. Following this analysis, three Ontario kindergarten teachers currently working in FDK classes were interviewed to learn more about their perspectives on the third theme (play-based teaching in kindergartens). This combination of traditional (interviews) and alternative methods (social media analysis) can enable a more comprehensive understanding of perspectives than either method could generate alone (Kozinets, 2010; Puri, 2007; Wilson, 2009). Being exploratory, the goal of this study was to develop areas for future researchers to examine and to compare the netnographic findings to previous research into teachers' perspectives of the FDK.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### *Netnography*

To study social media discussions, researchers use a methodology that applies the practices of ethnography to an internet-based setting: this methodology has been called netnography. A qualitative research methodology, netnography maintains the same goal as ethnography (to understand life from community members' perspectives) but adapts its perspective to study social media, for present purposes, the message board discussions and comment sections of online news articles described earlier (Kozinets, 2002). A netnographic study follows a process that resembles an ethnographic study, that is, it involves the study of distinctive meanings and practices of particular social groups (Kozinets, 2010). However, once a researcher has selected his / her research questions, the next step, instead of selecting a community site, is to identify relevant social media discussions (for the present study, Ontario kindergarten teachers' discussions about FDK). Social media discussions are then analyzed using a process similar to those used for transcripts in other qualitative data methods, such as interviews (Kozinets, 2010). As a qualitative approach, netnography aims to offer propositions that can inform future research, not to empirically generalize to a wider population. Its results can increase the store of particular knowledge, encourage broader and new perspectives, and generate hypotheses (Kozinets, 2010).

When attempting to learn from teachers, researchers have typically relied on interviews or questionnaires. These methods can be problematic due to self-representation biases. For instance, teachers' self-reports regarding adaptations made to program curriculum have been found to be negatively correlated with observations of teachers' classroom practice (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Dusenbury, Brannigan, Hansen, Walsh, & Falco, 2005; Hansen & McNeal, 1999). There are also some reliability concerns associated with online discussions, mainly, the possibility of participant fraud or misrepresentation. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) recommend dealing with questions of falsification in ethnographic research by means of well-developed field research techniques such

as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and researcher introspection. Similarly, such safeguards can be applied in netnographic research: careful and prolonged observation of the social media community will better enable the researcher to trust the online discussions (Kozinets, 1998, 2010). Additionally, Puri (2007) has provided three recommended practices when studying social media discussions: using message boards that provide user profiles, examining the content of individual posts to check for consistency over time, and using a number of boards, as opposed to relying only on one, to determine if the findings apply to more than one online setting. All of these recommendations were incorporated into the present study. Given the exponential growth of social media sites and online discourse, social media offer an innovative and timely data source for education researchers to derive insights into teachers' views of their profession.

### *Data collection*

McDermott, Roen, and Piela (2013) offer useful questions to consider when selecting social media data for a netnographic study: What are the participants' likely expectations of privacy and would participants experience any harm from their discussions being analyzed? For the present study, inclusion criteria were established to only include message boards and news articles that did not require membership, registration, sign-in, or password and were publicly accessible through a popular internet search engine. Additionally, while the data relates to personal opinions, one could argue that the data did not contain controversial or sensitive topics or opinions that would result in harming participants (particularly when compared to netnographies that have examined topics relating to recreational drug use or self-harm) (Bruckman, 2002; McDermott et al., 2013; Paetcher, 2012; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). Consequently, this study was conducted in line with past netnographies: data was only included if they were publicly available, participants were not considered vulnerable individuals, and the topic was not considered sensitive. Further by not reporting any of the names of the message boards or participants studied, no identifying information was provided on participants (Copelton & Valle, 2009; Hoffman-Goetz & Donelle, 2007; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Reichman & Atzi, 2012; Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012).

**Message boards.** To locate teacher discussion boards, phrases such as "teacher message boards" and "teacher chat" were entered into the internet search engine *Google*. This process was repeated as a second step, with two additional measures: applying the "discussions" filter and adding the term "inurl: forum," which would provide results from forums that may have been missed in the first search (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). These two searches returned hundreds of results. Finally, message boards identified from these searches were examined to remove any spurious matches, with the result producing a sample of relevant teacher message boards (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011).

Message boards were selected for inclusion in the study using criteria as follows: they were required to i) be publicly available with no membership, registration, sign-in, or password protection; ii) identify as providing a discussion forum for teachers (based on the name of the board and an examination of the board's self-description, located on its main page); iii) be published from 2010; and iv) be written in English. As a result, message boards were excluded from the study if they required a fee or password, did not self-identify as discussion boards for teachers, were published prior to 2010, or were written in a language other than English. Boards were rejected if any one of the exclusion criteria were met. In total, seven message boards were identified. With these smaller boards discussion topics were searched to locate those that were posted by Ontario kindergarten teachers and related to the Ontario FDK. Larger boards usually included a search engine for key words, which were used to find discussions related to the Ontario FDK by entering keywords such as "Ontario kindergarten" and "Ontario full day early learning kindergarten." Additional search terms such as "Ontario ELKP" (Early Learning Kindergarten Program) and "Ontario FDK" were based on words that had frequently appeared in the initially identified discussions. Two teacher message boards met the study criteria and contained 10 Ontario kindergarten teachers participating in discussions about FDK. All discussions were saved for analysis as PDFs.

**News articles.** To locate news articles, the phrases "Ontario play-based kindergarten" and "Ontario full-day kindergarten" were again typed into the search engine *Google* and then refined using its "news" filter. For each result that appeared to be from an online newspaper, the article comment section was examined to determine if there were comments at the end. If there were comments, they were read to determine if any were written by kindergarten teachers. The only way to determine this was if the commenter self-identified as a teacher. Comments were chosen for inclusion in the study using the following selection criteria: they were required to i) identify as having been written by a kindergarten teacher; ii) be published from 2010; and iii) be written in English. Conversely, comments were excluded from the study if the author did not self-identify as a kindergarten teacher, were made prior to 2010, or were written in a language other than English. Comments were rejected if any one of the exclusion criteria were met. Nine online news articles were found to include comments from 15 Ontario kindergarten teachers. All discussions were saved as PDFs for analysis.

### **Interviews**

Email interviews were conducted in January 2014. Purposive sampling was used to identify ten Ontario teachers working in FDK classes. Teachers were contacted by email and asked to participate in the interview. The final sample consisted of three female teachers aged 30, 32, and 51 with 7, 9, and 9 years of experience, respectively. The three teachers were emailed the interview

questions and asked to reply back by email with their answers within two weeks. Questions were open-ended and based on findings from the prior social media analysis that related to play-based teaching. For example, teachers were asked questions such as: "Other teachers have said they don't like teaching through play because there is no "end product" to evaluate. What do you think?" and "Other teachers have expressed concerns about play not preparing children for grade 1. How do you feel about this?"

### *Data Analysis*

All data were analyzed using an inductive approach that entailed summarizing and classifying the data (Creswell, 2009; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, data familiarization with the data was achieved by reading and re-reading the discussions or interview transcripts while creating reflexive notes. Next, interesting features of the data were noted by composing initial codes. The discussions were read line by line and coded under either anticipated themes (identified by previous research) or emergent themes. This was done by examining how information was presented in the discussions according to the use of key words, phrases, themes, metaphors, and analogies; by keeping alert to the ways in which ideas and patterned ways of thinking were imported from elsewhere; and by being prepared to draw upon a larger meaning through a connection to other discourses (Hollander & Gordon, 2006). Initial codes were applied to later data and additional codes were developed as new themes emerged, and some initial codes were revised. Related codes were then grouped together under the main themes identified in the data.

## **RESULTS**

In total, two teacher message-board discussions and nine online news-article discussion sections included Ontario kindergarten teachers discussing the Ontario FDK program. Three themes emerged through comprehensive analysis of teachers' discussions. The first two themes, class size concerns and team teaching concerns, were not explored with interviewed teachers, and so these reflect only the kindergarten teachers' social media discussions. The third theme, play-based curriculum concerns, was more complex and therefore was explored in interviews with teachers in addition to the social media discussions.

### *Class size concerns*

One of the most common themes kindergarten teachers discussed in the social media discussions was the large class sizes that have come about with the new program. They often described how, in spite of what they had been told regarding a cap on class size, they (or other teachers they interacted with) were experiencing a different reality: "So much for the cap of 26. I, like others, am worried about 26+ kids in one classroom even if there is a teacher and an ECE worker." Teachers reported a number of problems with such large



classes, especially constrained physical space. One teacher stated that “I don’t know if there is a cap on class size, but our ELP [Early Learning Program] classes had almost 30 kids. The teachers do not like it, mostly because of the huge class size and simply not having enough space to accommodate all those kids.” Another teacher agreed:

classroom space is a concern – it seems unimaginable to “cram” so many students in one room not meant for those numbers, but we often have those numbers and more for our intermediate classes and those kids are a lot bigger!! We are currently sitting at 25 students, with me, an ECE and a full-time EA providing support to a couple of students. Real estate in our classroom is going to be a real commodity!!

Not surprisingly, resultant noise levels, supervisory concerns, and general confusion affect instruction: “with such large classes (I have 28), it is almost impossible to have small group lessons at different centres, as the noise in such a small classroom is extremely distracting for the children. I have tried countless times to teach small groups as has the ECE, but it is quite different when children have to use the washroom and there is not a washroom in the classroom. The kids cannot be left unattended.” An interviewed teacher likewise commented that in the past, certain activities “worked well with the smaller class sizes.” But in the new FDK “having 27 students in the class (mixed JK/SK [junior kindergarten / senior kindergarten]) this was very difficult.” One teacher even stated that she was considering changing grades resulting from the large size of the kindergarten classes. She begins:

I have been informed by the lead Kindergarten Consultant that we have full day classes as large as 34 in our board. Visiting guest teachers to my school have informed me that the noise level in the classes is extremely high making programming very difficult.

And continues:

The noise levels keep the students agitated and fighting all day long. I am fully in support of full day kindergarten and I love teaching this grade. But reports about the impact of cramming 34 small children into one small class have me thinking about switching to a different grade, if I am able to do so, before this program comes to my school.

Teachers regularly described the negative impact large classes would have on children’s learning:

I have yet to see students being “equalized” by being in any large group setting. The ones that have had a solid background are far more ready to learn for a whole host of reasons. The ones who aren’t, have emotional and health issues which being with a crowd of children all day, whatever you call it, doesn’t fix.

While not a teacher himself, another poster described the potential challenges to his wife’s successful teaching as follows:

My wife is a JK teacher, and every teacher she has spoken to does not agree with this move. They do not feel it is in the best interest of the child to be in school all day, in particular in a class of up to 26 kids, with only 2 adults present. My wife presently has 17 JKs [junior kindergarteners] in her class, one with autism and 1 with Down's syndrome. She has one teacher aid assigned to her class. Between the two of them, it is a struggle to manage the two children with special needs and actually complete the curriculum. A class size of 26? Good luck. Maybe if special needs kids were not integrated into the regular classroom you'd have a chance

A teacher described her experience in writing to Ontario's Ministry of Education to voice her concerns about the large class size, reporting a frustrating outcome:

I am NOT a fan. The province funds based on one adult per 16 students. There is NO cap on class size. (I actually emailed the Ministry of Education about this, and they wrote back...to explain that there is no cap since we will have an ECE)

### *Team teaching concerns*

Across all the discussions about FDK, teachers expressed challenges in working with ECEs:

I taught full time JK for 9 years...last year with the ELKP. All I have to say is GOOD LUCK. I hope you get a good ECE in your room because mine was useless. It was like having a coop student in my room for the year. Not a good year. I am teaching Grade 4 this year!

Rarely did a teacher express unqualified positive emotion for the partnership, as in the following careful observation: "It's a very tricky situation. Some work out well, others not so much." A number of teachers pointed to a lack of shared planning time with ECEs as a major problem: "They are supposed to help plan units, and teach in small groups. But without planning time together this was impossible. Try to push for shared planning time, and be explicit in what you expect him / her to do when working with the children." Another explained how ECEs "are angry they get paid hourly, no prep and way less pay. Unfortunately, not the teachers fault, but it makes for very tense working conditions." Further, the absence of defined roles for teachers and ECEs in the FDK program contributed to teachers' resentment of ECEs and their view of ECEs as lacking the skills and knowledge to work in kindergartens. A few teachers were explicit about these perceived problems: "Some ECE's feel they shouldn't plan with the teachers, and others feel as if they ARE the teachers. However, the fact of the matter is their skill set is different than that of a *trained teacher* [emphasis added]." Another observed,

the major thing I find wrong with this program is that there are NO explicitly defined roles for the Teacher and ECE. You can get ECE's who think they know everything because they worked in a Daycare. Newsflash... it's school not a day care. But try working with someone like that!

Comments such as the preceding illustrate how power relations are undermining attempts to form pedagogical partnerships. Attempting to resolve such conflicts, one teacher wrote that if “the Ministry defined the roles a bit better, there would be more collaboration and productivity.”

### *Play-Based Curriculum Concerns*

*Curriculum uncertainties.* Teachers expressed anxiety not only about how to implement the new kindergarten program but also about the purpose of the new curriculum: “Although I am not currently in an all day everyday k[indergarten] class yet, I will be soon and I would like to be prepared for this inquiry based learning.” On another teacher message board, a teacher asked, “Can anyone recommend some resources on Emergent Learning/Inquiry Based Learning that they feel are “must have” in developing a solid understanding of how to best implement this approach in our Early Learning Programs?” And yet another teacher similarly inquired, “Would love to hear what worked, what didn’t, how you managed instructional times – large and small groups – etc. Also, I am very interested to hear what your planning teacher covered for you.” Once again the government was invoked as the solution: “It will certainly be interesting to see what the government and school boards mandate teachers to do with the increased hours with the children – obviously, at the end of the day that will determine the worth of the full day program.”

*Beliefs about play-based learning.* A few teachers supported the idea of a play-based curriculum: “I support the full day program.... The result of the more demanding curriculum has resulted in the gradual phasing out of play.” Another noted favourably:

I would certainly hope that the JK/SK programs would have a strong play component in them. The Ontario government academic expectations for young children are often out of sync with their development. Play allows children to learn to socialize with other children in positive ways. As a veteran teacher I have watched JK/SK classrooms change dramatically over the years and I am glad my children went when sand, water and play were still an integral part of the half day (then) program

Teachers commonly spoke of the social benefits of play, a finding that was again observed with the interviewed teachers, as two of the three interviewed teachers’ spoke positively of teaching through play. For example, one interviewed teacher described play as a “natural thing to do at this stage,” and identified the benefits of play as being social in nature. Other interviewed teachers described students learning how to cooperate and solve conflicts through sociodramatic play. One interviewed teacher even described her opposition to non-play-based teaching, stating: “The ability to complete a worksheet, in my opinion, is not something that I will support or teach in Kindergarten as it will not support those children as learners.”

However, more frequently, kindergarten teachers viewed the play-based curriculum as a threat to children's academic development. A teacher revealed that play does not fit with her view of a kindergarten class:

The Ontario model is fairly unstructured – children can choose to participate in 'formal lessons' but really, there's no 'plan' for the day – it's student directed learning. Is this great? Of course. But I think that children need structure, they need routine, and they need to learn how to behave in school and that it's not completely play.

An interviewed teacher similarly described that she was "not interested" in teaching through play because she prefers "teaching" and "seeing the growth and application of knowledge." Even teachers who supported play expressed the need not to describe their work as "play" but as "structured play," and emphasized their roles as "qualified professionals" in this process. Teachers also repeatedly forwarded the view that a division between play and academics should be maintained. According to one such teacher,

The social / emotional education that children gain through play in a structured environment while being supported and guided by a qualified professional is invaluable. Full day kindergarten could allow teachers to use the morning hours as prime academic time. The afternoon is an opportune time for structured play.... This enriched program can provide a more balanced and developmentally appropriate day and, ultimately, more well-rounded students. It is my genuine hope that they will allow us to slow the day down and find a balance of academics and play.

An interviewed teacher described a different challenge to teaching the new play-based curriculum. She explained how when she tries to teach by "following students' interests" (a hallmark of inquiry-based learning) she encounters students who are too shy and will never participate in voicing their interests whereas other students are dominant and always participating. The end result is that a segment of the class directs the interests of the whole class. How to meet these challenges? Recalling the proffered solutions for those of role definition and class size, one teacher requested that all problems associated with a play-based curriculum should be solved by the government:

The Ministry [of Education] must rethink the play-based curriculum and make it more of a balanced program where children are learning to form letters, identify letters and sounds, print sight words and beginning sentences with teacher modeling. Children can only write numbers at play based centres for so long before they are incredibly bored and restless.

**Grade 1 readiness.** The pressure that teachers felt to prepare children for the academic demands of grade one was perceived as an obstacle to supporting play-based teaching:

It is clear that a full day of play-based learning based on children's interests is not meeting the academic needs of our kids. Grade 1 teachers and parents are telling us that the children are not ready to write or read when they enter

grade 1. Literacy and numeracy is decreasing dramatically because there is only so much we can do with play-based centres.

An interviewed teacher reported “I haven’t met a non-K teacher who thought positively of teaching through play.” These thoughts were voiced by another interviewed teacher who reported she feels that some of her fellow teachers “think that all we do is sing and dance all day. I have a Masters in ‘singing and dancing!’” Another teacher stated on the message boards that “as the Ontario curriculum has intensified, the academic demands can be felt as early as the kindergarten years.” In contrast, one interviewed teacher expressed the opposite sentiment, stating how “Grade 1 teachers need to be prepared for the children coming from kindergarten, not the other way around.” She continued to explain how “children...entering Grade 1 with many skills that are better supported through play: self regulation, personal social skills, and many literacy / numeracy skills. The problem lies, currently, around Grade 1 teachers having a completely different structure for learning.” One interviewed teacher, who presented a unique perspective as she had taught kindergarten and was recently moved to grade one described her view on play preparing children for grade one, “I have had students with learning disabilities that haven’t been identified because there was never any requirement to read or write or any assessment of skill or concepts.”

**Parental pressure.** One teacher described how “parents feel pressure to prepare their young ones for the increasing demands of kindergarten.” This pressure was reported by all three interviewed teachers. One described how “many parents are upset.... When they come to first grade and can’t read or write, parents blame the kindergarten program for the reason – ‘all they did was play (and for 2 years)’.” Another explained how “Some parents realize that their kids play at school so they put them in tutoring programs or work at home with them. Other parents don’t.” Finally, the final teacher interviewed also described parents as having misconceptions about learning through play. To combat these misconceptions, she explained how she has report cards that are “really really in-depth” and further described her strategy of having her students complete worksheet exercises that she can “file away... parents appreciate knowing what their child is learning.”

## DISCUSSION

This section will provide a detailed discussion of how the findings compare with past research with educators in Ontario’s FDK.

### *Class size concerns*

Class size has been reported as a concern in past research on FDK, particularly when classrooms do not have the necessary physical space (Ryan & Date, 2012). Teachers in the sample of the present study discussed it much more

frequently, a finding that suggests future researchers may want to ask teachers directly if and how class size affects their teaching and relationship with the ECE. Future researchers can also examine the connections amongst these challenges. For example, one of the most common challenges described by teachers and ECEs was the lack of planning time allotted for implementing the FDK program. Some teachers reported that they do not have enough time to plan with their ECEs, and so have not implemented the curriculum in their classes (Katz & Dack, 2011). Consequently, how does a lack of planning time become problematic for classes operating with larger numbers than the recommended 26 children per class (Grieve, 2012a)?

### ***Team teaching concerns***

Unfortunately, many of the challenges identified in the present study regarding team teaching relationships have been identified in past research. It should come as no surprise that with teaching, planning, and assessing being shared among two different educators, conflict has resulted (Goulden, 2012). Concerns about a status hierarchy persisted among some ECEs working with kindergarten teachers (Corter et al., 2007). Indeed, Marsh (2011) reported that the teacher and ECE “team” was not a collaborative effort at all. Despite the intent of shared responsibility to plan and implement curriculum together, the teacher presumed authority and the ECE was relegated to a supportive role. Adding to this contentious issue, as was voiced by the teachers in the present study, others have found educators report a lack of clarity regarding the specific roles and responsibilities of ECEs and teachers in the classroom, especially with regard to the role of the ECE (Katz & Dack, 2011). Both ECEs and teachers were unsure of the role of each educator in the classroom and reported that there was no role description for each’s classroom duties and responsibilities (Katz & Dack, 2011). Without a clear understanding of their roles, teachers and ECEs relied on advice from colleagues about how the FDK program should operate (Tozer, 2012). With both teacher and ECE in the kindergarten classroom and with neither trained in working collaboratively to create new teaching practices, role confusion has inevitably ensued. Teachers struggled with relinquishing tasks and responsibilities that they have had for years, and ECEs struggled to find their place in the school system. Again, such challenges are understandable, as traditionally kindergarten teachers have been the only educators in charge of their classrooms, if often with help from supporting staff (Marsh, 2011).

Even though the present study involved only the views of kindergarten teachers and not ECEs, there were some remarkable similarities with research that used focus groups comprising both teachers and ECEs. In one such study an ECE described feeling treated as if she were a co-op student (Tozer, 2012). In another study, working with an ECE was identified as a concern for all kindergarten teachers (Goulden, 2012). From the ECEs’ perspectives, teachers lack an

understanding of the ECE's role in the school system; consequently, ECEs were frustrated over the inability to transfer their knowledge and skills in child development from the childcare sector to the education setting (Gananathan, 2011; Ryan & Date, 2012). In accordance with past research, the findings of the present study suggest that kindergarten teacher-ECE relationships would benefit greatly from clearer provincial-level direction as to each's role (Tozer, 2012). This suggestion — on the need for clearer direction from the provincial Ministry of Education — was repeatedly voiced by the teachers themselves in the social media discussions studied here. However, teachers' descriptions of ECEs and the difficulties in working collaboratively in the classroom reveal a more complex problem of what might be termed “power relationships,” and that problem most likely cannot be solved through government regulation respecting role clarification. With teacher and ECE partnerships not established on a foundation of mutual respect, with roles remaining unclearly defined, partnerships will continue as unequal and working environments will remain fraught with tensions. This finding requires more study, as such problems in team relations can adversely affect student success, whereas increased collaboration between educators has been related to greater program quality (Corter, et al., 2007; Goulden, 2012).

#### *Play-based curriculum concerns*

Teachers have expressed uncertainties with how to implement the FDK play-based curriculum (Goulden, 2012). Katz & Dack (2011) found that teachers and ECEs believed that they have not received enough information and training on implementing play-based learning and that, as a result, they did not know what to do in their classrooms. Such confusion resulted in uncertainty about what exactly they should be doing in a play-based kindergarten class and about how to implement the FDK curriculum. The present study corroborated these findings.

Past research has also reported much teacher confusion over how children learn through play, how play supports math and literacy development, and their puzzlement regarding the practical and pedagogical meaning of a “play-based” approach (Goulden, 2012; Tozer, 2012). Previous research has found that Ontario FDK teachers have the misconception that play-based learning involves no explicit teaching (Tozer, 2012). Other research has reported that play-based learning in Ontario's FDKs occurs in a structured manner, with one study finding that educators specified the amount of daily worksheets children were required to complete before being allowed to “play.” In some classrooms there was no distinction between play-based learning and other activities, as described in one study's observations: “the curriculum was supposed to be play-based but I have seen a huge focus on work sheets, tracing letters and other literacy activities” (Marsh, 2011, p. 49). Teachers and ECEs have also expressed confusion over the difference between how they taught in the past

and play-based instruction (Tozer, 2012). While Tozer's findings involved teachers' perspectives only, other research has revealed that the mistaken perspectives of both ECEs and teachers respecting play-based learning make the challenges difficult to overcome given such misunderstandings (Katz & Dack, 2011). Teachers and ECEs have even voiced concerns that the play-based approach will put children at a disadvantage in terms of being prepared for grade one (Katz & Dack, 2011).

Lastly, teachers in the present study reported that they are under pressure to prepare children for the academic learning of grade one and that, in their view, play does not adequately, if at all, prepare children. Other research has similarly found that teachers report being under pressure from their boards to "get the kids ready for Grade 1" (Katz & Dack, 2011, p. 24). As one teacher pointedly put it: "We always have to be cognizant for the SKs [Senior Kindergarteners] that starting in September they need to be sitting at a desk in Grade 1 and listening to a teacher" (Katz & Dack, 2011, p. 25). Such teachers have expressed beliefs that play and academic learning are incompatible, despite the fact that research has found that play is a viable source of intervention and that programs for young children should place more emphasis on encouraging play (Elias & Berk, 2002). However, as this study has demonstrated, trying to resolve this challenge of enabling kindergarten teachers to include play-based learning in the classroom is a complex issue, and simply providing teachers with educational courses on the value of play will not equip them with the abilities to deal with the realities of the educational system that pressure them to limit play in kindergarten (Moore, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Indeed, this point can be clearly seen in research that has examined American teachers' perspectives on play-based kindergartens. American kindergarten teachers have described feeling pressure to devote more time to academic learning and less to play activities (Goldstein, 2007; Moore, 2010). This finding holds even in schools that have play-based curricula: teachers still report feeling unable to implement play-based teaching methods in their classes due to pressures to prepare children for the academic expectations of higher grades (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Furthermore, even after receiving training on teaching practices that encourage play, Nelson and Smith (2004) and Moore (2010) found that not all of teachers involved were able to implement play-based teaching to its full capacity, again due to a lack of support from administrators and upper grade teachers.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the body of research examining social media discussions and should encourage future research on teachers' participation in message board and online news article discussions. Of particular interest in this respect was the way that the online environment appeared to enable teachers to express more openly the challenges they were experiencing in FDK



classes. For example, in the online environment, teachers freely expressed their frustrations in working with ECEs. This openness is most likely an effect of participants posting anonymously, which apparently permitted them to express their thoughts and feelings with a freedom they may not find in interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires (Porter & Ispa, 2012; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). Similar to Henrich and Holmes (2011) who concluded that social media discussions can be seen as reliable sources of data, this study found a high degree of corroboration between the social media discussions and the findings of research using interviews and focus groups.

The present study has limitations. Its sample was of teachers who freely chose to participate in social media discussions or an interview about play-based teaching, and therefore its findings respecting teachers' perspectives and classroom politics cannot be generalized to the whole population of kindergarten teachers and their classes. The present study might also be criticized because teachers who do not participate in these forms of online media are excluded from the sample (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011; Rowe Hawkes, & Houghton, 2008). While social media data may not be globally representative, the opinions nonetheless show the ways in which a sample thinks about a defined topic, and thus the data are qualitatively interesting (Rowe et al., 2008). As this study and other preliminary research into Ontario's FDK has demonstrated (Katz & Dack, 2011; Gananathan, 2011; Goulden, 2012; Marsh, 2011; Tozer, 2012), educators are facing numerous challenges in implementing the program, a finding that highlights the need for continued research with educators working in the FDK program so that it can better serve their and the students' needs.

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