

**Asking the Big Questions in Early Years Education Research:
Questions Suggested by Attendees at the AERO/EYEON Early Years Conference**

On May 1, 2015, the Association of Educational Researchers on Ontario (AERO) and the Early Years Education Ontario Network (EYEON) held a conference on “The Early Years: Laying the Foundations for Life.” In a presentation on “Asking the Big Questions in Early Years Education Research,” Nina Bascia, Ruth Childs, Susan Elgie and Jayme Herman asked the almost 200 educators, researchers, and administrators in attendance to discuss and write down on worksheets¹ their responses to the question, “What do we *really* want to know about the early years?”

The attendees’ responses suggest issues those working in and responsible for early years education in Ontario are most concerned about – and where they think more research is needed. Below are ten big questions, based on a thematic analysis of the many questions submitted by the conference attendees. Thanks to all those who suggested questions!

Big Questions	Example Questions from Conference Attendees
How can we know if FDK in Ontario is being implemented as intended?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will classrooms be monitored to ensure everyone is doing play based /inquiry based learning properly? 2. How do you ensure that the program is being implemented accurately? How does the research of the first phases of FDK ensure those classrooms actually implemented inquiry based learning? 3. Is practice matching the pedagogical vision – not only with regard to meeting the academic expectations but also with regard to social / emotional well being?
How can we involve parents and what happens when we do?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the best ways to support involvement of families? 2. What is the impact on child development and learning when parents engage with educators and community partners to observe, document and study learning? 3. How can we reach those isolated families who may be struggling for a variety of reasons? 4. How do we better educate parents about early identification and intervention so they don’t take a “wait and see” approach?

¹ The worksheets were collected by the presenters, who then transcribed and did a thematic analysis of the questions listed on the worksheets, yielding the ten big questions listed here.

Big Questions	Example Questions from Conference Attendees
How can we foster collaboration among organizations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can the schools collaborate with outside agencies to help create a strong and seamless system for all families? 2. How do we better coordinate preschool/daycare/homecare and FDK? 3. How can we provide seamless services to families with children in terms of these important areas of the child's well-being and development? 4. How can we further break down barriers between Ministries to ensure a cohesive, timely, effective response to community need? Would this be a more effective approach? For whom? In what ways?
How can we best support smooth transitions and continuing growth as children move from FDK to Grade 1 and beyond?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can we bridge the JK/SK play based environment with a traditional Grade 1 environment? 2. How do we extend the inquiry model beyond the early years? Would this be effective? 3. With the noted benefits of early years EDI scores in mind, what are we doing to sustain and maintain these benefits throughout the school years as teaching models change?
Does the FDK program provide equitable support to all children?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the implementation of FDK in Ontario closed the gap in EDI scores between the top and bottom quartile (SES) for our students? 2. Do students from different linguistic, ethnic, social , religious and racial backgrounds have varied needs? How might we address them? 3. How effective are programs such as FDK for different groups of children? How effective are the programs for children already at risk?
What are the long-term effects of FDK?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What effect/impact of FDK is left when the FDK cohort grows up? 2. Currently there is a mismatch between the teaching methodology in the early and later years. How does this impact student gains that would have been made in the early years? 3. What is the long-term impact of early years improvement in later years? What is the connection between gains and the intervention?
What is the effect of class size in FDK?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the ideal class size to support optimal learning? 2. How are class sizes being monitored? What is too many? 3. Has the removal of class size cap impacted the quality of teaching in JK/SK? What is the optimal class size cap?

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How are the partnerships between early childhood educators and teachers being supported?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What supports are available for partnerships in the FDK classrooms? 2. What is the plan for nurturing the relationship between ECEs and K-educators in the future to build effective partnerships? 3. What is the impact of having a teacher and ECE in FDK?
How can data collected using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) best be used?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What programming is needed to respond to the vulnerabilities identified by the EDI? 2. What can be done to support children now rather than using trailing data to inform future cohorts? 3. How can we use the information already learned at a population level to inform and impact the practices of the community?
How can we best support children's well-being?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What constitutes well-being and how can we ensure it during the early years? 2. How do we strike a balance between assessing and meeting criteria and ensuring the well-being of the children and educator in the classroom?