

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: AN ANALYSIS OF ONTARIO'S KINDERGARTEN CURRICULA
FROM 1998 TO 2016

by

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ABSTRACT

Children's rights: an analysis of Ontario's kindergarten curricula
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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) states that all children are rights holders and these rights should be a priority for the State. Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991; however, compared to other wealthy countries Canada is still lagging behind regarding children's rights education (Jerome et al., 2015). This study examined how and to what extent children's rights have been integrated in the Ontario's kindergarten curricula from 1998 to 2016, through a discursive analytical approach. The documents (1998, 2006, 2010/2011, 2016), were analyzed using the UNCRC General Principles (Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12) (United Nations, 2005). The findings showed that the integration of children's rights in the curricula has increased since 1998; however, children's rights are not thoroughly incorporated in the documents.

Keywords: Children; Children's Rights; Early Childhood; Kindergarten Curricula

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Introduction

Today, in Ontario every 4- and 5-year-old child is entitled to attend two years of full-day kindergarten program (OME, 2010/2011; Pascal, 2009). During the period of 2015-2016, 258, 065 children between the ages of 4 and 5 attended kindergarten in Ontario (OME, 2017), serving approximately 83% and 94% of 4 and 5 years old in the province respectively. A very important aspect of kindergarten is that it serves as a transitional stage between an early childhood setting and elementary school.

Early childhood is defined as the period in the life of all young children from birth throughout infancy, including the transition to school (United Nations, 2005). This period has been recognized as critical in a person's development (McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; United Nations, 2005; Pascal, 2009). The main factors that make this period critical are the rapid physical growth and brain development experienced by humans in their first years of life (Howe & Covell, 2013; United Nations, 2005). Furthermore, the experiences of a child during this period, have a direct effect over his or her learning capacities, behaviour and both mental and physical health (McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty (Howe, 2007; Howe & Covell, 2013). The UNCRC conveys the message that all children are rights holders. Moreover, the UNCRC states that children's rights need to be a priority for State parties that have ratified the treaty (Howe, 2007). Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991 (United Nations

Treaty Collection, 2017) and with this action pledged to incorporate the UNCRC into the laws, policies, and practices that effect children directly and indirectly. However, Canada's commitment to children's rights has not been as clear and decisive as been expected (Howe, 2007).

In the last concluding observations to Canada, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012) raised its concerns that awareness and knowledge of the UNCRC remains very limited amongst children, professionals working with children (including early childhood educators and teachers), parents, and the general public. According to an international study led by UNICEF regarding the implementation of the teaching and learning of children's rights in 26 nations (Jerome, Emerson, Lundy & Orr, 2015), Canada seems to continue to lag behind when compared to other wealthy countries. Moreover, children's rights have not been included as a mandatory subject in teacher training (Jerome et al., 2015).

According to Di Santo and Kenneally (2014), early learning curricula are an excellent way to introduce children's rights. Hence, the purpose of the current study was to evaluate how and to what extent children's rights have been integrated in Ontario's kindergarten 1998, 2006, 2010/2011 and 2016 curricula documents. At the time of the writing, Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) is the only research found that looks into the integration of children's rights into early years curricula in Ontario. The explicit incorporation of children's rights in early childhood curricula could facilitate the increment an increase in children's rights awareness as well as the fulfillment of children's rights within school. Because of these reasons, it is of

utmost importance to incorporate children's rights into early childhood and school curricula.

The four general principles of the UNCRC: 1) children's right to non-discrimination; 2) best interests of the child; 3) children's right to life, survival, and development; and 4) children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them and to have their views taken into consideration (United Nations, 2005) were used to assess the integration of children's rights in the 1998 to 2016 kindergarten curricula. These principles play an important role in the realization of children's rights in early childhood (United Nations, 2005).

Social Location

I was first introduced to the UNCRC as a 9-year-old fourth grade student in the Dominican Republic. It was the first time that I ever thought of myself as a rights-holder. I still remember how empowered I felt after learning about my rights. Moreover, I also remember feeling frustrated and denigrated every time I recognized that my rights were being violated, especially when I could not freely express my opinions on matters affecting me. My interest in children's rights continued throughout my undergraduate studies in Argentina and while I worked in the field. However, it was during my graduate studies that I started to study children's rights in depth.

The most valuable aspect of the UNCRC is that it conveys a clear message that children are rights-holders, and as such, they deserve respect. The UNCRC recognizes the dignity of children as human beings and not merely as children who

will become adults. The recognition and integration of children's rights within kindergarten curricula, as well as in the day-to-day classroom activities would increase the general awareness of the UNCRC for both children and adults alike. Furthermore, by educating children about their rights, they could have the same feelings of empowerment and self-worth that I experienced in my early years, leading to happier and healthier children. This should be one of our main responsibilities as adults, especially those working as early childhood professionals.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the conceptualization of children and childhood developed by the Sociology of Childhood (SC). The SC recognizes children as holders of human rights (Quennerstedt, 2016). The SC focuses on the value and status of children at the present time and rejects the idea of children as "not-yets" (Quennerstedt, 2016, p. 661). Furthermore, the SC conceptualizes children as capable, competent, and active social actors that shape, and are shaped by their circumstances and surrounding society (Albanese, 2009; James & Prout, 1990; Quennerstedt, 2016).

Children are not considered passive receivers who are just absorbing information, instead they are actively interpreting and contributing to their socialization and learning experiences (Matthews, 2007). Moreover, as Matthews explains, the SC emphasizes that children are social actors capable of making sense of their worlds. The SC criticizes the practice of allowing others, mainly adults (e.g., mothers, teachers) to speak for children, which silences them (Matthews, 2007). Although this study did not include children, and their voices are not actively

present, the analysis of the kindergarten curricula was guided by the SC, specifically with a focus on children's voices.

The SC opposed the conceptualization of children as objects of natural development or socialization; these conceptualizations are found within the traditional psychological and sociological theorization of children (James & James, 2004). The SC opposes the focus on the future-oriented 'becoming' child in which the child is seen as an 'adult in the making' and viewed as incompetent and in the process of acquiring adult skills (Uprichard, 2008) but rather it advocates for the 'being' child; who is an active social actor that is constructing their 'childhood' (Uprichard, 2008). However, as Uprichard (2008) eloquently argues "children and childhood are always and necessarily 'being' and 'becoming'" (p. 303). Qvortrup (2004) points out that many supporters of the SC have disregarded the fact that growing up is a part of childhood as a social phenomenon, and that children themselves are "anticipating adulthood in ways that contributed to forming their childhood in the here and now" (p. 269). Therefore, looking into the future to what the child 'becomes' is as important as focusing on the 'being' child (Uprichard, 2008). In this regard, the UNCRC states "every child has the inherent right to life" and that "States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" (UN General Assembly, 1989), inherently focusing on the child 'being' and 'becoming'. Following Uprichard's (2008) argument, one of the consequences of children having their rights fulfilled is that it allows them to live their childhood and become adults.

Literature Review

This section explores the body of knowledge that refers to the core concepts of this study. First, the UNCRC will be described. Second, the paper will discuss how children's rights in early childhood are fulfilled, concentrating on the four general principles of the UNCRC, and the right to play. Third, a description of the specific situation of the UNCRC in Canada is discussed. Lastly, this paper provides a brief overview of children's rights education.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

On November 20 1989, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously approved the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989). The UNCRC has been signed and ratified by almost every member of the United Nations, with the exception of the United States; making it the most widely signed and ratified human rights treaty (Alderson, 2008; Howe, 2007; Howe & Covell, 2013; Vaghri, Arkadas, Kruse & Hertzman, 2011). Canada signed the UNCRC in May 1990 and ratified it in December 1991 (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2017). The UNCRC's Article 1 defines children as people under the age of 18, unless age of majority is attained earlier (UN General Assembly, 1989). Furthermore, it states that all children must be respected and supported not because it is charitable or the right thing to do, but because it is their inherent right as human beings (Howe, 2007).

The UNCRC communicates the message that children have basic human rights. Moreover, these rights should be given priority in public law and policies (Howe, 2007). The UNCRC provides a global standard on the treatment of children

(Howe, 2007). However, Freeman (2000) argues that the UNCRC should not be considered as the ultimate goal for children's rights, instead it should be regarded as a starting point for a children's rights agenda.

By ratifying the UNCRC, State parties are recognizing that all children have fundamental rights as individual persons. Furthermore, the State is committing to ensure that these rights are enacted (Urinboyev, Wickenberg & Leo, 2016). The UNCRC enacts a legal relationship between the child and State (Lansdown, 2005), challenging the conception that parents own their children, and further emphasizing the respect for children as citizens and as rights holders (Alderson, 2008). The UNCRC is a tool for child advocacy organizations and provides a standard of measurement to assess the actions of governments in relation to children, as well as an instrument to advocate for improvements (Howe, 2007). For this reason, the analysis of Ontario's kindergarten was conducted through the lens of the four general principles of the UNCRC.

Article 43 establishes a system of reporting and assessment (UN General Assembly, 1989) and outlines a formal system of evaluation for State parties to detail their achievements in implementing the UNCRC. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) monitors State parties compliance of the UNCRC. This overseeing body is comprised of a group of independent international specialists on children's rights (Lansdown, 2000; Vaghri et al., 2011). Furthermore, the Committee provides State Parties with further guidance on specific topics under the form of General Comments. For example,

General Comment #7 (GC #7) refers to the implementation of children's rights in early childhood. The UNCRC and GC #7 guided this analysis of Ontario's kindergarten curricula.

The UNCRC in Canada

Canada has been regarded as an international leader in the subject of children's rights (Howe, 2007; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009). Canada played a pivotal role in the drafting of the UNCRC, and in 1990 was co-chair for the World Summit for Children (Howe, 2007; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009). However, Canada's commitment to children's rights and to the implementation of the UNCRC has been and continues to be questioned by non-governmental organizations, children's advocates, and children's rights scholars (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2012; Howe, 2007; King, Wattam & Blackstock, 2016; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009).

Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2016 was US\$42,157.90, the 17th highest GDP per capita worldwide (World Bank, 2016). Furthermore, Canada has the 10th highest Human Development Index (HDI) in the world (United Nations Development Program, 2016a). The HDI is defined as a measure of a country's average achievement in three key dimensions: health and life expectancy, level of education and gross national income (GNI) per capita (United Nations Development Program, 2016b). Over the past 25 years, substantial progress for children has been achieved worldwide (UNICEF Innocenti Research Center &

UNICEF Canada, 2009). However, in a country like Canada, with a strong economy, political stability and technical knowledge, a more refined realization of children's rights in the laws, policies, and services is expected (UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009). When compared to other developed countries, with high GDP per capita and HDI, Canada shows a high percentage of children in out of home care (e.g., foster care) and in the justice system (United Nations, 2003, 2012; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009); high prevalence of childhood obesity (United Nations, 2012), child mental illness and teen suicide (UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, 2017); less quality-assured childcare spaces than other countries with similar economic capacity (United Nations, 2012; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009); a lack of protection of children against violence (United Nations, 2003, 2012; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009); and disparities between the performance of Indigenous children and other Canadian children on many measures of well-being, mainly due to poor allocation of funds for Indigenous children (United Nations, 2003, 2012; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, 2017).

In the last concluding observations for Canada's combined third and fourth periodic report released in 2012, the Committee expressed concerns over similar topics presented in the past concluding observations (United Nations, 1995, 2003). Some of the main concerns expressed by the Committee were related to raising awareness of children's rights and the implementation and dissemination of the

UNCRC (United Nations, 2012). The Committee continues to encourage the federal government to create a systematic programme to promote and disseminate the UNCRC. Article 42 states that “State Parties undertake to make the principles and provision of the Convention widely known by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike” (UN General Assembly, 1989 p.12). Hence, Article 42 implies that the effort made by State Parties should go beyond having the information and resources available on their websites (Covell, 2007; United Nations, 2012). Furthermore, Howe & Covell (2013), echoing the Committee’s recommendations, state that an effective way to raise the awareness of children’s rights among children and adults will be realized by fully implementing children’s rights education into the school curricula.

The Committee urged the State parties to create mandatory training on children’s rights for all professionals that work with and for children (United Nations, 2012). Regardless of this plea, early childhood educators and teacher training does not include a compulsory course on children’s rights (Jerome et al., 2015). As a result of this lack of dissemination and awareness of the UNCRC, 75% of young people who participated in a survey did not know how to exercise their rights or about their responsibility to respect the rights of others (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2012). Moreover, according to a cross-national survey carried out by Ipsos Reid (2005), 61% of Canadians believe that children’s rights are fully realized in this country; however, only 46% of the total people surveyed, were aware of the existence of the UNCRC.

Canada has been called to incorporate children's rights education into the school curricula by scholars and children's rights advocacy groups (Covell, 2007; Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014; Jerome et al., 2015; United Nations, 2003, 2012; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009). Since Canada has a federal system of government, education lies within the jurisprudence of the governments of the provinces and territories; hence, we need to assess the efforts of each province and territory in the process of incorporating children's rights education and the UNCRC into their curricula. Some provinces, like Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, and British Columbia, have incorporated children's rights into their school curricula (Covell, 2007; UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009).

Children's Rights in early childhood

Early childhood, which is defined as the period from birth to 8 years of age (United Nations, 2005), has been recognized as a vulnerable stage for the fulfillment of children's rights (Alderson, 2008; United Nations, 2005; Vaghri et al., 2011). In 2005, the Committee published General Comment No. 7 (GC7) in response to the lack of early childhood information provided by the State parties in their reports (United Nations, 2005; Vaghri et al., 2011). The inclusion of early childhood in the reports was generally limited to child mortality, birth registration and health care (United Nations, 2005). The Committee felt the necessity to expand the discussion about the implications of the UNCRC for the early years (United Nations, 2005), as they feared that State parties could be neglecting their responsibilities towards

young children (Vaghri et al., 2011). With the GC7, the Committee put forward the message that young children are holders of all the rights embraced in the UNCRC, and that early childhood is a critical period for the fulfillment of these rights (United Nations, 2005). The Committee encourages State parties to recognize that early childhood is much more than just a period of socialization of the immature human being towards the required adult status (Alderson, 2008; United Nations, 2005).

Similarly, Alderson (2008) advocates for the recognition of young children as active members of their families, communities and societies. The author emphasizes that young children have their own concerns and opinions about what surrounds them (Alderson, 2008). Due to the nature of early childhood, a period characterized by the child's need for physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance, the child especially requires the support of an adult for the fulfillment of their rights (Alderson, 2008; United Nations, 2005). Hence the plead made by the Committee in GC7 for State parties to provide children's rights training for professionals working with and for children, especially Members of Parliament, judges, lawyers, law enforcement officers, staff from institutions and places for detention of children, teachers, health practitioners, social workers, local leaders, and children and their parents (United Nations, 2005).

General Principles of the UNCRC.

The Committee identified Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12 of the UNCRC as general principles (United Nations, 2005). The four general principles are equally important and none of them should be considered as subordinates to the other (Howe &

Covell, 2013). These principles have implications for the fulfillment of children's rights in early childhood (United Nations, 2005). This section will briefly describe each of these principles.

Article 2 affirms that every child has the right to live free of discrimination and conveys the message that children must not be subjected to discrimination (United Nations, 2005). The Committee recognizes that young children have a higher of risk of being discriminated against due to their dependence on others (mainly adults) for the realization of their rights, and the relative powerlessness associated with their age (United Nations, 2005). Discrimination can take many different forms in early childhood, including inadequate levels of nutrition, inadequate care and attention, limited opportunities for play, learning and education, inability and/or the restriction of the opportunities to express their feelings and views (United Nations, 2005). The Committee highlights that there are particular groups of children that historically have been target of discrimination, such as children with disabilities, children infected with HIV/AIDS, and children of different ethnic, religious, caste, and political backgrounds. Furthermore, the Committee calls upon the State parties to ensure that children are not affected by discrimination experienced by their parents, and to eradicate every form of discrimination (United Nations, 2005).

Article 3 states that the principle of best interests of the child has to be of primary consideration in all actions that affect children (Howe & Covell, 2013; United Nations, 2005). Due to young children's "relative immaturity" (United

Nations, 2005, p. 6), they rely on responsible adults to evaluate and represent their best interests in all decisions affecting their well-being. In every situation, decision makers must assess what is considered the best interests of the individual child (Zermatten, 2010). The Committee has also specified that the best interests of the child cannot be used to justify certain behaviours such as corporal punishment (United Nations, 2005). Furthermore, the Committee (United Nations, 2005) established:

The principle of best interests applies to all actions concerning children and requires active measures to protect their rights and promote their survival, growth, and well-being, as well as measures to support and assist parents and others who have day-to-day responsibility for realizing children's rights (p. 6).

Article 6 communicates the inherent right of every child to life and that State parties have the responsibility to ensure "the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" (United Nations, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, the Committee calls upon State parties to improve and provide pre- and post-natal care for mothers and babies, to lower infant and child mortality rates, and to create conditions that foster the well-being during the critical period of early childhood (United Nations, 2005).

The Committee emphasizes that Article 6 involves all aspects of development and reminds State parties that physical health and psychosocial well-being are interdependent (United Nations, 2005). State parties are encouraged to provide

extra attention to children that may be growing in particularly complicated circumstances (United Nations, 2005). To fulfill the right to survival and development, Article 6 needs to be enforced with all the other provisions of the UNCRC namely right to health, adequate nutrition, social security, adequate standard of living, healthy and safe environment, education and play, while ensuring the provision of support and quality services and respecting the responsibilities of parents (United Nations, 2005). Lastly, the Committee encourages the inclusion of children from a young age in activities that promote good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle.

Article 12 asserts that the child has “the right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, and to have them taken into account” (United Nations, 2005, p. 6). The UNCRC recognizes that children have an active role in the promotion, protection and monitoring of their own rights (United Nations, 2005). Furthermore, children are to be recognized as active participants in their families, communities and society (United Nations, 2005).

The Committee calls upon State parties to take the necessary actions to ensure that from the earliest ages, children are viewed as right holders, who have the freedom to express their views freely and should be consulted in matters that affect them (United Nations, 2005). The right to express their views needs to be enacted in all contexts of the child’s life. For the fulfillment of the right to participation, it is necessary that adults adopt a child-centered attitude, demonstrate patience and the creativity to adapt their expectations to the young

child's level of interest, demonstrate understanding, and understand the different ways children communicate (United Nations, 2005).

Right to Play.

Children's right to play was not included as part of the pre-established criteria that informed the analysis of the kindergarten curricula. However, it is the only UNCRC Article explicitly stated in two of the four kindergarten curricula included in this research project. *The Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2010/2011) and *the Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) included Article 31 as part of the rationale for a play-based program. Article 31 states "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations, 2005, p. 15). The right to play is considered as one of the most forward-thinking aspects of the UNCRC (Davey & Lundy, 2011). The inclusion of the right to play as a stand-alone provision, differentiated from the right to education, took considerable amount of negotiation between the members of the group drafting the UNCRC (Detrick, 1992). Article 31 cannot be considered in isolation as other rights have direct relevance for the fulfillment of the right to play (Davey & Lundy, 2011). According to Davey and Lundy (2011) the four general principles are particularly relevant for the child's enjoyment of the right to play. Furthermore, the authors explain that to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the right to play, in addition to the four general principles, there are other UNCRC Articles that need to be taken into consideration. Examples include Article 19 that ensure the child's right

to be protected from harm, Article 15 that establishes the child's right of freedom of association, Article 23 that states that children with disabilities have a right to social integration, and Article 29 that describes the aims of education.

The importance of children's play for their development has been widely recognized in the work of researchers, policies and everyday practice (Lifter, Foster-Sanda, Arzamarski, Briesch & McClure, 2011). There is a robust body of knowledge that demonstrates the relationship between play and specific skills related to the children's development such as literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2001), self-regulation (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007), and social interaction skills (Odom, McConnell & Chandler, 1993). Furthermore, theorists such as Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) have conceptualized children's play as central to their cognitive and emotional development.

The inclusion of play in the classroom has been shown to stimulate children's learning in subjects such as mathematics, language, early literacy development, and social and emotional skills (Duncan, et al., 2007). Furthermore, the inclusion of play in the classroom benefits children from both low- and higher-income households (Duncan et al., 2007). As well as assisting the development of subject specific skills, one of the major benefits of play is that it provides a medium for children to learn how to cooperate with others and how to engage in social interactions (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013; Eberle, 2011). Moreover, play enables brain development especially the prefrontal cortex (Pellis, Pellis & Himmler, 2014). Taking into consideration the demonstrated importance for the children's

development, the Committee alerts us that State parties have not given sufficient attention to the implementation of the right to play (United Nations, 2005).

Furthermore, the Committee argues that young children have few opportunities to meet to play and interact in “child-centered, secured, supportive, stimulating and stress free environments” (United Nations, 2005, p. 15).

Children’s rights education

Children’s rights education (CRE) is conceptualized as the education and educational practices that are aligned with the UNCRC. This form of education builds on the fundamental idea that children are right holders and citizens. Schools are viewed as democratic communities in which children have an active role in the management and everyday life of the school, creating a space where they are able to acquire the values and put in practice their citizenship (Covell & Howe, 1999, 2001; Howe & Covell, 2010). Children’s rights education has been recognized “as a transformative tool that promotes constructive and democratic relations in the classroom as well as increases children’s engagement in the management of schools” (Urinboyev, Wickenberg & Leo, 2016, p. 540). Educating children about their rights has shown to have positive results on their understanding of their rights and responsibilities, boosting the child’s sense of active citizenship, and generating a positive school climate, based on mutual respect, tolerance for differences and good social relationships, which results in a better learning environment (Covell & Howe, 1999, 2001; Howe & Cowell, 2010). However, the implementation of CRE has encountered numerous challenges, especially in schools. This is a particular

problematic situation as children spend a large portion of their time in school. Hence, schools are the ideal space for children to learn and practice their rights (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Howe & Cowell, 2010, UNICEF, 2009). Furthermore, education has a special role in the UNCRC; it is both a right and imperative for the realization of the rest of the rights comprised in the Convention (Urinboyev et al., 2016).

The Rights, Respect and Responsibility (RRR) initiative is a rights-based whole school reform initiative implemented in Hampshire, UK (Covell, Howe & McNeil, 2008, 2010; Covell, Howe & Polegato, 2011; Covell, 2010, Howe & Covell, 2013). The main goal of the RRR initiative is “to improve educational outcomes for children by transforming school cultures, building a shared-values framework based on the Convention [UNCRC], and promoting educational practices consistent with the Convention [UNCRC]” (Howe & Covell, 2013, p. 173). The RRR initiative was inspired from the children’s rights education curriculum design by Katherine Cowell and Brian Howe and implemented in Nova Scotia, Canada (Covell & Howe, 1999). When compared to their peers who did not attend RRR, the students demonstrated higher levels of participation, less social problems, better self-concept and higher levels of optimism (Covell & Howe, 1999). Also, research found that students in RRR were more involved in the management of schools (Covell, Howe & Polegato, 2011). Regardless of these positive results, the RRR initiative has not received wide support from teachers and school administrators, as they are concerned that RRS could undermine the teacher’s authority (Covell, Howe & Polegato, 2011).

Child Friendly Schools (CFS) is a UNICEF developed child rights-based approach to education with the goal to include UNCRC principles into the classroom and the school management practices (UNICEF, 2009). The CFS has been identified as a promising approach for the promotion of respectful and collaborative relationships between teachers and students and has been shown to produce a democratic school management style (Wickenberg & Leo, 2014; Wickenberg et al., 2012). As a result of being taught about their rights and responsibilities, as well as being respected as citizens, children have demonstrated that they feel more empowered, engage in a meaningful way in school activities, and are morally and socially responsible for their actions (Clair, Shirley & Deepa, 2012; Weshah, Al-Faori & Sakal, 2012; Wickenberg & Leo, 2014; Wickenberg et al., 2012).

The RRR and CFS approaches are promising initiatives that could help increase the awareness of the UNCRC and its implications, for both adults and children alike. The need to raise awareness has been echoed by several institutions. For example, the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights has called for the integration of the UNCRC into school curricula to raise awareness among the general public, especially children (UNICEF Innocenti Research Center & UNICEF Canada, 2009). Although most Canadian provinces and territories have a child and youth advocate, (the exceptions are Prince Edward Island and the Northwest Territories) (Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, n.d.), assessing how children's rights are being implemented is being conducted mainly by non-profit organizations and academics in the area of children's rights. For example, Di Santo

and Kenneally (2014) conducted a discourse analysis of the *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework on Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (2007), in order to evaluate how children's rights are reflected in the curriculum framework that is widely used in the province of Ontario. Di Santo and Kenneally's (2014) research on this matter is the only study conducted that focuses on Ontario's early learning curricula. Furthermore, Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) provided educators with a framework to help them make children's rights central to the curriculum they currently use. Also, the authors expanded on how educators might be able to implement the UNCRC in their everyday practice with young children (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014). This present study will add to the literature by assessing how the integration of children's rights in Ontario's kindergarten curricula has progressed from 1998 to 2016.

Regardless of where children spend most of their day, it cannot be ignored that early learning settings, specifically kindergarten, are largely responsible for ensuring that children are respected as human beings with rights. Furthermore, educational settings should provide children with opportunities to learn about their rights and to practice them (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to assess how and to what extent children's rights have been incorporated in the different versions of Ontario's Kindergarten Program – 1998, 2006, 2010/2011, 2016. The reason behind the selected curriculum documents is based on the fact that the 1998 curriculum was

the first one to be released by the Ontario's Ministry of Education after Canada's ratification of the UNCRC in 1991. With the ratification of the UNCRC, Canada committed to make the fulfillment of children's rights a priority. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of how children's rights have been integrated into the kindergarten curricula since Canada's ratification of the UNCRC, including the current kindergarten curriculum. This information could be helpful to kindergarten educators that seek to integrate children's rights into their day-to-day practice, for the students, academics, and to policy makers when drafting future versions of the Ontario's kindergarten program and other early years policies.

Research Question

This study aimed to answer the question: How and to what extent have children's rights been integrated into the Ontario's Kindergarten curricula from 1998 to 2016?

Methodology

Approach

This investigation employed a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is most appropriate when trying to explore and understand a particular topic. One of the main reasons to conduct a qualitative study is to explore a topic that has not been well documented (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, Creswell (2014) theorizes that a qualitative research approach is

usually necessary when there is little information available on the specific topic on hand.

While reviewing the body of knowledge in relation to the implementation of children's rights in Ontario, especially looking into the integration of children's rights into early years curricula, the existence of a knowledge gap is evident. Only one pertinent study was found. Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) conducted a discourse analysis of the *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings (2007)* to assess how children's rights are reflected in this curriculum framework that is widely employed in Ontario.

This study employed a discourse analysis approach to assess Ontario's kindergarten curricula from 1998 to 2016. While there is not a single definition for discourse analysis, scholars using this approach usually focus on studying the language as it relates to social practice (Potter, 2004). Across the different types of discourse analysis, there are some common assumptions (Lester et al., 2017). For example, language is conceptualized as "the medium by which social life is accomplished" (Lester et al., 2017, p.3). Furthermore, in discourse analytical approaches, language is not considered neutral or as a reflection of reality, but as the direct opposite. Reality and knowledge are interpreted as constructed through and in the language (Lester et al., 2017). Lastly, scholars employing a discourse analytical approach critique some of the knowledge and practices that could be taken for granted (Lester et al., 2017).

Ontario's Kindergarten Curricula (1998 – 2016)

Four kindergarten programs released by the Ontario Ministry of Education since Canada's ratification of the UNCRC in 1991 (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2017) were chosen for this study: i) *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998), ii) *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006), iii) *The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (Draft Version)* (OME, 2010/2011), and iv) *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016). The programs were assessed for children's rights language, with the purpose of understanding how and to what extent children's rights have been incorporated within the documents.

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 1998) was the first policy document for kindergarten published by the Ontario Ministry of Education in over five decades. The document delineated the educational policies that informed kindergarten in Ontario starting September 1998. The Kindergarten Program (OME, 1998) was designed to align with the curricula from grade 1 to 8. Refer to Table 1 to see the number of pages and sections of the four documents.

Table 1

Kindergarten Programs' sections summary

Title	Pages	Sections
<i>Kindergarten Program</i> (OME, 1998)	22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program content and Teaching/Learning Approaches • Program Planning and Delivery Expectations
<i>Kindergarten Program (Revised)</i> (OME, 2006)	66	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a Learning Community • The Learning Program • Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting • Teaching/Learning Approaches • Some considerations for Program and Planning • The Learning Expectations
<i>Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (Draft Version)</i> (OME, 2010/ 2011)	156	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Building a Learning Community • Teaching/Learning Approaches • The Learning Program • Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting • Some Considerations for Program Planning • The Learning Areas: Program Expectations
<i>Kindergarten Program</i> (OME, 2016)	328	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Program to Support Learning and Reaching in Kindergarten • Thinking about Learning and Teaching in the Four Frames • The Program in Context • The Learning Expectations

The Kindergarten Program (Revised) (OME, 2006) replaced *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) beginning September 2006. From this date on, kindergarten programs across Ontario were based on the content of this curriculum. The revised program also aligned with the curricula from grade 1 to 8, providing a continuum from Kindergarten to 8th grade.

In 2010, the Government of Ontario enacted Bill 242: *The Full Day Early Learning Statute of Law Amendment Act* (Turgeon, 2014). The Bill amended *The Education Act*, to enable school boards to operate a full-day learning program for 4- and 5-year-old children. Simultaneously, the program also offered the option of a before and after school extended day program, based on the needs of the families. The program rolled out over 5 years, starting in 2010, and becoming fully available by the 2014-2015 school year (OME, 2014a). *The Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (Draft Version)* (OME, 2010/2011) replaced *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) beginning in September 2010. All full-day-kindergarten programs were based on the expectations outlined in the 2010/2011 edition of the document. The program is enacted by an Early Learning-Kindergarten team, which includes an early childhood educator and a kindergarten teacher (OME, 2010/2011, p. 7). The program “lays the foundation for children’s smooth transition to Grade 1 and for success throughout their school years” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 3). The program is a “child-centered, developmentally appropriate, integrated, extended-day program of learning for four- and five-years old” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 1). The program is aligned with the *Early Learning for Every Child Today* [ELECT] (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning [BSEPEL], 2007) Ontario’s framework for early childhood settings. The ELECT sets out six overarching principles to guide practice in early years setting in Ontario (BSEPEL, 2007, p. 5):

1. Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.

2. Partnerships with families and communities strengthen the ability of early childhood settings to meet the needs of young children.
3. Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion are prerequisites for honouring children’s rights, optimal development and learning.
4. A planned curriculum supports early learning.
5. Play is a means to early learning that capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity and exuberance.
6. Knowledgeable, responsive early childhood professionals are essentials.

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 2016) is the most current Kindergarten curriculum. Beginning September 2016, the new document replaced *The Full-day Early Learning Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2010/2011). Similar to the 2010/2011 version, *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) is a “child-centred, developmentally appropriate integrated program of learning for four- and five-year old children” (OME, 2016, p. 8). The 2016 program incorporates the principles of the *ELECT* and is aligned with the pedagogical approaches of *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years* (HDLH)(OME, 2014b). HDLH (OME, 2014b) is “a professional learning resource guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families. It is intended to support pedagogy and curriculum/program development in early years programs” (p. 5). HDLH outlines four foundational conditions important for children to grow and fully develop. These conditions are: “Belonging, Well-being, Engagement and

Expression” (p. 7). *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) incorporates four “frames”, or broad areas of learning, which structure the thinking about learning and assessment of the program. The frames – Belonging and Contributing, Self-Regulation and Well-Being, Demonstrating Literacy and Mathematics Behaviours, and Problem Solving and Innovating – align with the four foundational conditions that are central to the pedagogy that is outlined in HDLH (OME, 2014b).

Data Analysis

The lack of information on the integration of children’s rights into school curricula is evident. As an attempt to address this gap, this study assessed how and to what extent children’s rights have been incorporated in the 1998, 2006, 2010/2011, and 2016 versions of Ontario’s Kindergarten. Since there are four different kindergarten curricula available (OME, 1998, 2006, 2010/2011, 2016), I have the means to follow the changes and development of the incorporation of children’s rights in these particular documents (Bowen, 2009).

This research carried a discursive analytical approach that employed thematic coding according to “pre-established criteria” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 390) to gain insight into how and to what extend the four kindergarten curricula (OME, 1998, 2006, 2010/2011, 2016) reflect and support children’s rights, and to assess the changes across the different curriculum documents. The four general principles of the UNCRC (Article 2, 3, 6, and 12) as stated in General Comment #7 (United Nations, 2005) were the essential analytic tool utilized in this analysis and served as themes for organizing the codes. Article 2 refers to right to non-

discrimination and “ensure rights to every child, without discrimination of any kind” (United Nations, 2005, p. 5). Article 3 states “best interests of the child are primary consideration in all actions concerning children” (United Nations, 2005, p. 6). Article 6 refers to the “child’s inherent right to life and the State parties’ obligation to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child” (United Nations, 2005, p. 4). Article 12 states that the “child has a right express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, and to have them taken into account” (United Nations, 2005, p. 6). The four general principles were employed as “pre-established criteria” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 390) to analyze the documents and organize the findings.

The kindergarten curricula were analyzed in chronological order to avoid influencing the researcher by the contents of newer versions of the *Kindergarten Program* while analyzing previous versions. The data analysis process required several steps. First, each document was read in order to become familiar with the contents. I read through the documents a second time with the intent to identify areas where children’s rights language was included in the discourse. Examples of children’s rights language are: child-centered, empowered, agency, participation, inclusion, respect, diversity, rights holders, and well-being (e.g., Alderson, 2008; Caplan, Loomis & Di Santo, 2016; Davey & Lundy, 2011; Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014; Howe, 2007; Lundy, 2007; United Nations, 2005). After each document was completely analyzed separately, the findings were compared. The findings of each of the four general principles were compared in chronological order with the purpose

of assessing the integration of children’s rights in Ontario’s Kindergarten curricula over time. See Table 2 for the codes corresponding to each of the four themes.

Table 2

Coding sheet

Article 2	Article 3	Article 6	Article 12
Non-Discrimination	Best interests of the child	Life, survival and development	Express their views freely in matters affecting them
Inclusion	Protect	Well-being	Active participants
Diversity	Support	Development	Children’s perspectives
Equity	Parental support	Growth	Children’s own opinions
Community	Child-centered	Health	Child’s ideas
Citizens	Shared power (Between children and educators)	Psychosocial	Children’s inquiry
Cultures	Relationships	Survival	Consulting children
Traditions		Holistic manner	Listening children
Nationalities		Optimal	
Unique		Needs	

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the themes resulting from the analysis of the Ontario kindergarten curricula from 1998 to 2016 from a children's rights lens.

Article 2: Right to Non-discrimination

Article 2 refers to the right of the child not to be discriminated against under any circumstances (United Nations, 2005). The Committee states that young children have a greater risk of being discriminated, this is mainly due to their relative powerlessness and the fact that young children depend on others for the realization of their rights (United Nations, 2005). Embedding the principle of non-discrimination into early years curricula could increase awareness of educators about the issue, helping to mitigate the higher risk of discrimination that certain groups of children such as children with disabilities, children infected with HIV/AIDS have historically suffered (United Nations, 2005). Article 2 was found to be implicitly embedded in the discourse of the assessed kindergarten curricula to different extents.

The Preface of *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) affirms that the program is for "all children"; however, it also states that "teachers may adapt the program for students with special needs" (p. 2). The use of the word "may" could have led the reader to think that inclusion was optional within this curriculum. The 1998 program refers to the inclusion of children with disabilities on two occasions within the section "The Learning Environment" (OME, 1998, p. 9). First, it encourages teachers that when planning for the *use of space* teachers should

consider “the need for easy access for students with physical disabilities” (OME, 1998, p. 9). Secondly, it calls upon teachers to “consider the need for assistive devices and supportive technology for students with disabilities” (OME, 1998, p. 10) when planning the *use of resources*. This statement shows an attempt to advocate for the inclusion of children with disabilities.

The curriculum expresses that “children arrive at school with different backgrounds and experiences at different stages of development” (OME, 1998, p. 3) and that “diverse backgrounds of children” (OME, 1998, p. 9) affect the range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that children bring to the school. Also, the program prompts teachers to “recognize that each child is unique” (OME, 1998, p. 9). The inclusion of children with disabilities, the recognition of children’s diverse background, as well as their uniqueness are all necessary concepts for the realization of the principle of non-discrimination.

The Kindergarten Program (Revised) (OME, 2006) further expands many of the concepts that were included in its predecessor, and introduces other concepts to further help ensure the fulfillment of the right of each child not to be discriminated against on any grounds. *The Revised Program* (OME, 2006) continues to incorporate the concepts of inclusion and diversity throughout the curriculum. This document expands on the concepts and explicitly recognizes that children in the kindergarten program are from diverse socio-cultural contexts, have diverse linguistic realities, they develop at different rates, and have different learning needs (OME, 2006).

Furthermore, it affirms that teachers need to be “culturally and linguistically responsive” (OME, 2006, p. 2).

This curriculum recognizes that in multicultural communities it is necessary to arrange for interpreters to ensure accurate communication with the parents of all children regardless of their language (OME, 2006). The availability of interpreters is crucial to avoid potentially discriminating against children based on their parents’ language domain (United Nations, 2005). The document seems to shift the discourse from just recognizing diversity (OME, 1998) to an attempt to create an environment that reflects and respects diversity (OME, 2006). This could lead to a more inclusive learning environment that facilitates the fulfillment of the rights of non-discrimination, the program calls for teachers to “plan for learning in a diverse, inclusive environment” (OME, 2006, p. 25). However, it does not elaborate on how to create this desired inclusive learning environment any further than suggesting the use of dual-language books.

The Revised Program (OME, 2006) implements the principles of antidiscrimination in education, which influences all aspects of school life. These principles of antidiscrimination seek to ensure that all students have “an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential” (OME, 2006, p. 25). The program states that all learning activities, as well as materials and learning resources used, “must be free from bias and stereotyping” (OME, 2006, p. 26). To achieve a goal of a program free from bias and stereotyping, the document gives teachers several suggestions, namely: the use of stories books in which the characters are not being

stereotypically depicted to have both male and female dolls and clothing available in the drama center and to ensure that when doing art activities children are provided with a range of colours to allow them to represent themselves using realistic skin colour (OME, 2006). These are all key elements for the fulfillment of the right to non-discrimination since these details could help children feel more accepted, while giving them more options to freely express themselves without being judged.

The Full Day Early Learning-Kindergarten (Draft Version) [FDELK] (OME, 2010/2011) is guided by six fundamental principles. These principles are based on the six overarching principles of the Ontario's *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT) (BSEPEL, 2007). The ELECT's third principle states that "respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion are prerequisites for honouring children's rights" (OME, 2010/2011, p. 2). The principle is further supported by the program's view of children, as "unique individuals who live and learn within families and communities" (OME, 2010/2011, p. 1). Making these statements in the first two pages of the document conveys a clear message of commitment to the fulfillment of the rights of all children.

The 2010/2011 curriculum reflects a change in how cultural and linguistic diversity is viewed in the kindergarten program. Previously, *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) and *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) recognized that children have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The FDELK (OME, 2010/2011) describes cultural and linguistic diversity in terms of richness and cultural assets. For example, when describing children who are English

language learners, the document states that they “bring a rich diversity of background knowledge and experience to the classroom” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 38). Furthermore, it explains that the child’s linguistic and cultural background supports their learning but also becomes a “cultural asset in the classroom community” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 38). Caplan, Loomis, and Di Santo (2016) argue that non-discrimination could be conceptualized as valuing diversity. This positive and strength-based conceptualization of diversity fosters an environment that facilitates and supports non-discrimination.

The FDELK (OME, 2010/2011) is based on the principles of inclusive education. The curriculum states that:

...all children, parents, other family members, and other members of the school community – regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, sex, physical or intellectual ability, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other similar factors – are welcomed, included, treated fairly, and respected. (OME, 2010/2011, p. 41)

This statement explicitly states that everyone must be included in the FDELK program. Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) affirm that “inclusion of all children in early learning programs, regardless of macro-social factors, such as culture, race, and socioeconomic status, is a key element of non-discrimination” (p. 398). Even though the 2010/2011 document statement does not explicitly refer to the right to non-discrimination, it is aligned with Di Santo and Kenneally’s (2014) observation. Therefore, it seems that Article 2 (children’s right to non-discrimination) is

implicitly integrated in the curriculum. Furthermore, the document also seems to follow the recommendations made by the Committee to ensure that each and every child has their rights fulfilled without discrimination towards them or as a consequence of discrimination against their parents (United Nations, 2005).

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 2016) incorporates four frames, which structure the thinking about learning and assessment of the program. The principle of non-discrimination seems to be embedded in the frame “Belonging and Contributing” (OME, 2016, p. 13). According to the document, the frame “Belonging and Contributing” encompasses

children’s learning and development with respect to: their sense of connectedness to others; their relationship with others, and their contributions as part of a group, a community, and the natural world; their understanding of relationships and community, and of the ways in which people contribute to the world around them. The learning encompassed by this frame also relates to children’s early development of the attributes and attitudes that inform citizenship, through their sense of personal connectedness to various communities. (OME, 2016, p. 14)

The document states that by supporting children’s sense of belonging and contributing through collaboration, empathy, and inclusiveness; the environment of the kindergarten classroom becomes “an environment in which children are affirmed as individuals and members of a diverse community of children” (OME, 2016, p. 50). The integration of the frame of “Belonging and Contributing” into the

kindergarten curriculum helps foster a more inclusive environment, as it seeks to affirm children “as individuals and as members of a diverse community of learners” (OME, 2016, p. 50). Furthermore, the document states that “children’s sense of belonging and contributing grows as they: develop an appreciation of diversity and an understanding of the concepts of equity, equality, fairness, tolerance, respect, and justice” (OME, 2016, p. 50). The understanding of the aforementioned concepts is necessary for the development of an environment free of discrimination. According to the curriculum, in an inquiry-based approach “learning is personalized and differentiated” (OME, 2016, p. 27), which would also foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment. The connection between an inquiry-based approach, the frame “Belonging and Contributing”, and Article 2 is strengthened by the statement that through an inquiry-based approach the concepts of citizenship and social justice emerge naturally (OME, 2016).

Article 3: Best interests of the Child

Article 3 of the UNCRC establishes that “the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all actions concerning children” (United Nations, 2005, p. 6). Furthermore, the fulfillment of the best interests of the child requires taking active measures to “protect their [children’s] rights and promote their survival” (United Nations, 2005, p. 6). The best interests of the child extend to the need to provide support and assistance for parents and others who are responsible for the realization of children’s rights, such as educators and other members of the school community (Howe & Covell, 2013; United Nations, 2005).

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 1998) states that “to give students the best start possible, it is essential that kindergarten programs provide a variety of learning opportunities and experiences” (p. 3), thus providing the reader with the impression that the best interests of children were taken into consideration. The program introduces the idea that teachers should “ensure a balance between teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities” (OME, 1998, p. 8). However, this is an isolated statement since this concept is not developed further in the document.

The program (OME, 1998) seems to be highly teacher-centered. According to the program are teachers should “plan learning experiences that promote integrated learning and that allow children to handle, explore, and experiment with material that are familiar to them from their environment or that they can relate to everyday life” (OME, 1998, p. 8). Teachers tend to be positioned in an active role in reference to the children’s interactions. Furthermore, the 1998 document states that “not all play activities should be initiated by the teacher” (OME, 1998, p. 7), which may lead the reader to think that most play activities are indeed initiated by the teacher. There is little to no space within the curriculum discourse for children to express their views. This is problematic, as the best interests of the child goes beyond provision and protection of harm (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014). Moreover, the Committee affirms that taking children’s views into account is in their best interests (United Nations, 2005).

The analysis of *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) through the lens of the principles of best interests of the child yields similar findings to the 1998

document. There is no evidence of children being recognized as rights holders, which is problematic since this recognition is necessary for the fulfillment of their rights. Furthermore, statements such as “children are given opportunities to choose activities to demonstrate their knowledge” (OME, 2006, p. 3) may convey the message that this right is given to children by their educators, as if rights are something that can be given, instead of recognizing that children’s rights are inherently theirs, as human rights. Furthermore, educators should play a pivotal role in the fulfillment of children’s rights by teaching them about their rights.

However, the 2006 curriculum showed some improvements when compared to its predecessor, such as the expectations regarding school principals. The document states that to support children’s learning, principals need to ensure that the Kindergarten Program implemented at their school is “developmentally appropriate and that it reflects research-based, pedagogically sound practices that support all children through the use of appropriate instructional approaches and resources” (OME, 2006, p. 3). This seems to convey that principals should ensure that the best interests of the child are always taken into consideration. It is important to be aware that young children rely on responsible adults to evaluate and enforce their rights and best interests in relation to all decisions that affect their well-being (United Nations, 2005).

The Full Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Program (Draft Version) (OME, 2010/2011) is the first curriculum document to explicitly refer to children’s rights. First, with the incorporation of the ELECT’s principles (BSEPEL, 2007), specifically

Principle 3, which states that “respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for honouring children’s rights” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 2). Furthermore, the document makes a direct reference to the UNCRC with the inclusion of Article 31: right to play. This marks a shift from the previous curricula, which did recognize children as rights holders. The explicit recognition of children as rights holders, as well as the integration of the rights to play within the document can be interpreted as greater commitment to the inclusion of children’s rights in Ontario’s kindergarten programs.

The 2010/2011 program prompts educators to create a balance between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities. When discussing the use of time within the program, the curriculum states that educators need to “plan for a daily block of time for child-initiated learning activities” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 37). Several other statements related to the balance between teacher- and child-initiated activities were found within the document, in the sections “Some Considerations for Program Planning” and “The Learning Areas: Learning Expectations” (OME, 2010/2011). However, the document does not provide any further explanations on how to achieve this balance.

The 2010/2011 curriculum recognizes the value of relationships for children’s development. Within the section “Some Consideration for Program Planning”, the curriculum includes a component on “Healthy Relationships”, which acknowledges the importance of “relationships based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 44) for children’s learning and

development. The development of healthy relationships is also embedded in the learning expectations for “Personal and Social Development” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 54-55). This idea is clearly reflected when the document states that “As children progress through the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten, they: demonstrate an awareness of ways of making and keeping friends (e.g., sharing, listening, talking, helping); entering into play or joining a group with guidance from the EL-K team” (OME, 2010/2011 p. 54). The value given to the importance of healthy relationships for children’s well-being is an important finding that shows how the best interests of the child were taken into consideration when developing the FDELK (OME, 2010/2011).

In the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016), the emphasis given to relationships is even greater than in the 2010/2011 document. The document establishes that one of the primary goals of the *Kindergarten Program* is “to allow children to reap the many proven benefits of learning through relationships, and through to play and inquiry” (OME, 2016, p. 8). Another important finding is that 2016 *Kindergarten Program* is the first curriculum that includes research to support its statements and allegations. The usage of evidence-based best practices could be interpreted as acting in the best interests of the child.

The curriculum further attempts to create a power balance between children and educators. In this regard, the document fosters a reciprocal relationship between children and educators by giving the former the role of co-learners and giving value to what children can actively bring to the relationship. Di Santo and

Kenneally (2014) argue that the adult-child power imbalance is against the best interests of the child. Therefore, by attempting to ameliorate the power imbalance and explicitly highlight the importance of a reciprocal relationship, the document is again reflecting its consideration for the best interests of the child.

Article 6: Right to life, survival and development

Article 6 refers to “the child’s inherent right to life and States parties’ obligation to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child.” (United Nations, 2005, p. 4). Article 6 recognizes childhood as a critical phase of children’s lives, and urges State parties to create the necessary conditions to ensure children’s well-being. Furthermore, Article 6 encompasses all aspects of development over time and acknowledges the interdependence between children’s health and their psychosocial well-being. The Article also acknowledges that the implementation of the right to survival and development can only be achieved through a holistic manner, through the application of the other UNCRC Articles, such as the right to health (Article 24), social security (Article 26), adequate nutrition (Article 24), a healthy and safe environment (Article 27), education (Article 28) and play (Article 31), and by acknowledging and respecting parents’ responsibilities and the provision of assistance and quality services (Article 5) (United Nations, 2005).

Findings reveal two main concerns regarding the integration of Article 6 in the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998). First, the curriculum does not reflect the development of the whole child, rather the main focus seems to be on the development of the skills necessary for future school grades. The document puts

great emphasis on the preparation of children for the upcoming grades. In this regard, the document states “The learning expectations outlined in this Kindergarten document represent the first steps in a continuum of programming from Kindergarten to Grade 8” (OME, 1998, p. 12). The importance of learning the necessary skills for the upcoming years is undeniable. However, when placing emphasis on the future child we run the risk of neglecting the present child.

Second, Article 6 acknowledges the holistic application of the right of survival through the application of the other provisions of the UNCRC, such as the right to health, adequate nutrition, social security, and an adequate standard of living (United Nations, 2005). However, the curriculum limits its consideration of Article 6 to some statements related to personal hygiene, nutrition, recognition of hazards and physical activity. Furthermore, the scarce comments regarding physical activities do not seem to foster a language of inclusion, since they have no contemplation for children with mobility limitations. In this sense, the Health and Physical Activity expectations, states that by the end of kindergarten, children will “participate willingly in creative movement, dance and other daily physical activities” (OME, 1998, p. 19) and “demonstrate balance, ease, and flexibility in movement (e.g., in walking, running, jumping)” (OME, 1998, p. 20). Both statements imply that children have no mobility challenges, without any comment promoting the inclusion of children who do have mobility limitations.

Without diverging much from its predecessor, the *Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) also emphasizes children’s physical health and well-being.

However, the language used in the 2006 document signals a shift towards a more inclusive environment for children. For example, in the section “Developmental Considerations for Kindergarten Children”, the curriculum reads “Each child has unique strengths, interests, and needs that require teachers to adjust teaching methods and materials accordingly” (OME, 2006 p.20).

The *Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006), suggests an “ages and stages” approach to children’s development. Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) found that the ages and stages approach of the ELECT framework, hindered the possibility for children to demonstrate their agency. Similar results were found in the *Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) as children seem to be depicted as passive receivers of the knowledge created by the teachers. In this regard, the document highlights the importance of having teachers monitoring the progress of children “in order to provide instruction that will enable all children to reach their full potential” (OME, 2006 p. 6). Furthermore, the document invites teachers to “observe the children in their classrooms in order to plan effectively and should adjust their teaching methods to meet the unique needs of each child” (OME, 2006 p. 30). Under this approach, the teacher models the inquiry process and poses question to the children. This idea manifests itself when the document states that “the teacher should model the inquiry process and pose questions that encourage, support and extend the children's learning (OME, 2006 p. 12)

The 2006 curriculum states that it focuses on who the children are, supporting and encouraging them to reach their full potential. However, there is

little evidence of children being encouraged to freely express who they are within the 2006 document. Furthermore, similar to its predecessor, the *Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) seems to focus mostly on the future of the child, while somehow neglecting the child in the present.

The FDELKP (OME, 2010/2011) aims to provide every child with the kind of support that he or she needs in order to develop, namely: health, well-being and a sense of inquiry. Furthermore, from early in the document, the program establishes that the child's development is the main focus. Overall, findings are similar to those of the 2006 curriculum. However, the document puts a greater emphasis on the need to conduct strength-based assessments than its predecessors. In this sense, the curriculum informs educators that "differentiated instruction will be needed to meet children's individual needs" (p 30), conveying a stronger message of commitment to the development of children.

Similar to the 1998 and 2006 documents, the FDELKP program seeks to encourage and equip children to "make healthy choices and engage in daily physical activity" (p. 129). The discourse does not promote the inclusion of children who have mobility limitations. Finally, the FDELKP (OME, 2010/2011) continues to put the emphasis on the future child and the process of acquiring the skills necessary for the following grades and future adult life. The focus on the 'becoming child' is problematic as it can lead to neglecting the present realities of the 'being child' (Uprichard, 2008).

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 2016) emphasizes the importance of play for “the development of children’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being” (OME, 2016, p. 12). Furthermore, a play-based program enhances the child’s autonomy as a learner. Expanding on the idea of responding to children’s needs, the document propels educators to develop a flexible and creative learning environment that can be adapted according to children’s interests (OME, 2016), which in turn gives children space for autonomy regarding their play and learning processes. However, the child’s autonomy seems to be circumscribed to the space created by the educators. The educators are positioned in a more active role in the design of the environment and the planning of daily activities. After the educators design the environment and develop the plan for the day, children are invited to choose between a couple of options offered by the educators. They are not included in the design from the beginning.

The need of the child to develop is described as the educators’ main concern. In this sense, the document states that “Promoting the healthy development of all children and students, as well as enabling all children and students to reach their full potential, is a priority for educators across Ontario” (OME, 2016 p. 5). *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) further demonstrates its commitment to child development with the inclusion of “self-regulation and well-being” (OME, 2016, p. 15) as one of the four frames that guide the curriculum. This frame focuses on children’s learning and development of the whole child. By also focusing on the

children's mental health and wellness, this document provides a greater holistic conceptualization of the children's development and health.

This curriculum also includes the children's need to spend time outdoors. "A growing body of research suggests that connecting to the natural world contributes to children's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being" (Louv, 2005 as cited in OME, 2016, p. 34). Furthermore, the 2016 document states that this "nature deficit" (OME, 2016, p. 34) is associated with childhood obesity, attention disorder and depression. These two statements show that the 2016 curriculum focuses on the well-being of children in the here and now, and not necessarily on the future child.

Article 12: Children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them

The UNCRC demands that all children, including the youngest, "be respected as persons in their own right" (United Nations, 2005, p. 3). To obtain this respect towards all children, the Committee called for the recognition of the early years as more than just a period of socialization of the immature human being (United Nations, 2005). Furthermore, the Committee affirms that children are active social actors that affect and are affected by their surroundings and have their own interests and concerns (United Nations, 2005). This shift in the conceptualization of young children from passive receivers of information to active participants is necessary if the early years programs want to assist young children in the realization of their rights (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014). By stating this, the UNCRC's

conceptualization of the child is aligned with that the Sociology of Childhood's views of the child as a capable, competent and active social actor (Albanese, 2009; James & Prout, 1990; Quennerstedt, 2016). This conceptualization of the child is intrinsically reflected in Article 12, since a real consideration of the views of the child could only be possible if they are first recognized as capable, competent human beings. Hence, the way in which each kindergarten curriculum conceptualized the child, was a key factor, when analyzing the integration of Article 12 in the curricula.

The *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) depicts children as passive receivers of the knowledge communicated by the teacher. Article 12 did not appear to be reflected in the curriculum. Children's voice only appears in responses that are mechanical and repetitive, which correspond to the learning expectations. Teachers are prompted to plan activities in which they will encourage the children to "explore, create, predict, attempt, analyze and reflect" (OME, 1998, p. 4). The teachers maintain the control of the activities in which children engage. Furthermore, after receiving encouragement from the teachers, children are expected to start performing activities related to reading, such as "repeating words, naming characters, and identifying signs, labels, names, letters, and letters sounds" (OME, 1998, p. 5).

Findings show that there is a shift in *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) from its predecessor. The 2006 document emphasizes the importance of encouraging children to talk about what they are learning, as well as providing some guidance for teachers on how to model language use and the processes of

thinking and reasoning for the children. Teachers need to regularly report on children's progress towards the achievement of the kindergarten expectations to parents and the children themselves. The document states that "Assessment strategies and tools might include the following: self-assessment and peer-assessment" (OME, 2006, p. 10). However, the curriculum does not provide ways for the implementation and facilitation of the children's assessment or guidance for the teacher on how to facilitate the children's self-assessment and peer-assessment. Providing examples and guidance would have demonstrated a greater commitment to ensuring the children's voice in the assessment process.

The 2006 document states that "children begin to communicate and to ask questions while they are experimenting and investigating by describing materials they use, indicating a problem they might have had, or beginning to listen to their peers and offering suggestions to them" (OME, 2006, p. 12-13). Within the section "Developmental Area: Emotional Maturity", the program's consideration invites teachers to "provide opportunities for children to express their own points of view" (OME, 2006, p. 21). However, the program does not further develop this idea or provide examples on how teachers can create these opportunities for children to express their own opinions.

The FDELKP (OME, 2010/2011) affirms that it "reflects the belief that four- and five-year-olds are capable and active learners, full of potential and ready to take ownership of their learning" (p. 2). This statement can lead the reader to expect children to have an active voice and to express their views freely. However, when

the 2010/2011 document was analyzed through the lens of Article 12, there were not many references to the inclusion of children's voices in the Program, with the exception of some cases with a very specific context. For example, the document points out that "drama also gives children the opportunity to respond in role and to take on roles in which they express different points of view, and thus supports the development of empathy" (OME, 2010/2011, p. 17).

As conveyed by the document, every interaction between children and educators is mainly managed and determined by the latter. Children's free expression seems to be restricted to the spaces that educators have created with that intention. Several statements from the 2010/2011 document support this idea:

Children are offered choices of learning activities that reflect developmental stages. (OME, 2010/2011, p. 13);

The Early Learning Kindergarten [EL-K] team should: provide opportunities for children to express their own points of view, provide opportunities to make independent choices, provide support and, as appropriate, encourage development of independence. (OME, 2010/2011, p. 34);

In order to support the children's development of independence, the EL-K [educators] team invites the children to use their name cards to choose the centers they want to work at throughout the day. (OME, 2010/2011, p. 63);

The EL-K [educators] team plans programs that allow children to explore language and communicate their thinking and learning in meaningful ways to both team members and their peers. (OME, 2010/2011, p. 68)

When compared to previous curricula, these statements can be considered as an improvement. However, educators still have an active role in determining how and to what extent children can express their views on matters affecting them.

The *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) encourages educators to “intentionally and purposefully listen to children” (p. 24), which is extremely important for the development of a culture of inquiry, where children’s voices are valued and encouraged. Educators are prompted to engage the children in discussions with the purpose of fostering the inquiry process and an inclusive learning environment.

Children become much more engaged in their learning, when the learning environment is planned and designed in negotiation with the children – that is, when ‘the children’s voice’ is heard in planning the environment and organizing and selecting materials for learning. (OME, 2016, p. 32)

These inclusions in the 2016 program indicate that children’s voices are valued and encouraged to a greater extent than in previous versions.

The curriculum makes the assertion that children are ‘capable and competent’ numerous times in *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016). The introduction section of “A Program to Support Learning and Teaching in Kindergarten” (OME, 2016, p. 7-45) states that “The kindergarten program reflects the belief that four- and five-year-olds are capable and competent learners, full of potential and ready to take ownership of their learning” (OME, 2016, p. 8) and “All children are competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential

and experience” (OME, 2016, p. 10). Following these two statements, the 2016 document refers to some of the benefits of seeing children as competent and capable. Several examples include, “when educators view children as competent and capable, the learning program becomes a place of wonder, excitement, and joy for both the child and the educator.” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 9, as cited in OME, 2016, p. 10);

An awareness of being valued and respected – of being seen as competent and capable – by the educator builds children’s sense of self and belonging and contributes to their well-being, enabling them to be more engaged in learning and to feel more comfortable in expressing their thoughts and ideas. (OME, 2016, p. 11);

and “seeing all children as competent and capable of complex thinking and learning promotes effective documentation” (OME, 2016, p. 38). These statements that reflect this conceptualization of children as competent and capable are mainly restricted to the section “A Program to Support Learning and Teaching in Kindergarten” (OME, 2016, p. 7-45). This conceptualization of children, as capable and competent is aligned with the Sociology of Childhood’s view of the child, which conceptualizes children as capable, competent, and active social actors that shape, and are shaped by their circumstances and surrounding society (Albanese, 2009; James & Prout, 1990; Quennerstedt, 2016).

The curriculum presents the concept of educators and children as “co-learners” (MOE, 2016, p. 10). This conveys a more balanced relationship between

educators and children in the learning process than in the previous versions of the curriculum. However, the educators are also noted as the “lead learners” (MOE, 2016, p. 11); therefore, the curriculum contradicts its previous statement and situates the educators in the active role in children’s learning. According to Lundy (2007), the exercise of the child’s right to express their views in matters affecting them depends on the cooperation of the adults. Thus, this inconsistency on how the role of educators on children’s learning is described could affect children’s capacity to provide meaningful input in the decision-making process, as they seem to be underestimated by educators and the developers of Ontario’s kindergarten curricula (Caplan, Loomis, & Di Santo, 2016; Lundy, 2007).

Article 31: Right to play

Article 31 was not one of the pre-established criteria employed for the analysis of the kindergarten curricula. However, it arose from the data. Article 31 is the only UNCRC Article that is explicitly stated in the kindergarten curricula. The right to play was incorporated in the FDELK (OME, 2010/2011) and appears again in *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016).

Play is one of the main characteristics of early childhood and it provides a medium through which children expand their capacities, whether playing alone or with others (Duncan et al., 2007; Eberle, 2011; Lifter et al., 2011, United Nations, 2005). Play has been associated with the development of early literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2001), self-regulation (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007), social interactions (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013; Eberle, 2011; Odom,

McConnell & Chandler, 1993), and to assist children in the learning of subject specific skills, such as mathematics and language (Duncan et al., 2007). The inclusion of the right to play within the UNCRC is considered one of its most innovative aspects (Davey & Lundy, 2011).

Lester and Russell (2008) state that the body of knowledge regarding play can be broadly grouped in two categories: play as an instrument for learning and healthy development, and play as something intrinsically important by itself. The way in which play is incorporated within the kindergarten curricula has changed from version to version. *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) and the *Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (OME, 2006) conceptualized play as a medium for learning. The 1998 program states “play provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive” (OME, 1998, p. 6). Furthermore, the 2006 program defines play as “a vehicle for learning” (OME, 2006, p.14). The 2006 document depicts teachers as having an active role in the children’s learning, even within the children’s play. This idea becomes evident when the document states that: “It is important that teachers assess what and how children learn through play by observing, documenting and analyzing their observations of children’s play” (OME, 2006 p.14); and that “teachers should also monitor play activities carefully and be available to assist with or extend the activities as appropriate” (OME, 2006 p. 15).

The FDELKP (OME, 2010/2011) and *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) differentiate from the other two documents by explicitly incorporating Article 31,

the right to play, which also happens to be the only UNCRC Article that has been explicitly integrated in both the 2010/2011 and 2016 version of the *Kindergarten Program*. The 2010/2011 program states that “it [play] is so important that the United Nations has recognized it as a specific right for all children” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 13). In the 2016 document explicitly states that: “Play is recognized as a child’s right, and it is essential to the child’s optimal development” and “The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes “the right of the child... to engage in play... appropriate to the age of the child” and “to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”” (OME, 2016, p. 12).

The recognition of the right to play is particularly important for the inclusion of children with disabilities. Poulsen and Ziviani (2004) point out that the right to participate in play is particularly critical for children with disabilities, however, they have reduced opportunities to engage in play. As Davey and Lundy (2011) eloquently explained, the right to play cannot be considered in solitude. As explained in previous sections, there are other UNCRC articles that need to be ensured in order to fulfill children’s right to play. For example, Article 23 states that children with disabilities have the right to social integration. Hence, Article 31 and Article 23 are intrinsically correlated since is through play that children socialize and is with social integration that children with disabilities can be fulfill their right to play with their peers.

The 2010/2011 and 2016 curricula expand on the incorporation of play, by prompting educators to allow for large blocks of time for free and self-initiated play.

The 2010/2011 document states that “play is vehicle for learning and lies at the core of innovation and creativity” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 13). The same exact statement is also found in the 2016 program (OME, 2016, p. 18, 91). Furthermore, both documents state that “play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children, and learning and doing are also inextricably linked for them” (OME, 2010/2011, p. 13; OME, 2016, p. 18). Furthermore, there is a robust body of knowledge that supports the recognition of play as an instrument for learning and healthy development. (e.g., Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007; Duncan et al., 2007; Eberle, 2011; Odom, McConnell & Chandler, 1993; Pellis, Pellis & Himmler, 2014; Piaget, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978). This finding shows that the relevance of play has been taken into consideration in the design of both documents. The Committee warns about the few opportunities that children have to play (OHCRH, 2005). With the importance that the curricula gives to play, and its recognition as a critical activity for children’s development, the documents are assisting the fulfillment of the right to play, which could be interpreted as an attempt to address the Committee’s concern.

Comparison of the Kindergarten Curricula (1998 – 2016)

The four kindergarten curricula (OME, 1998, 2006, 2010/2011, 2016) were analyzed through the lens of the UNCRC’s general principles: Article 2: the right to non-discrimination; Article 3: the best interests of the child; Article 6: the right to life, survival, and development; and Article 12: the right for children to express their views freely in matters affecting them and to have their views taken into

consideration (United Nations, 2005) and the UNCRC Article 31: right to play. Overall, the results indicate that the integration of children's rights within the Ontario kindergarten curricula has increased. However, it is disappointing to find that teaching children about their rights and the UNCRC is still not included in the most recent version of the Kindergarten Program.

The *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 1998) is the document that least reflects children's rights language. This is not an unexpected discovery taking into consideration that this document was released only seven years after Canada's ratification of the UNCRC (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2017). On the other hand, the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) is the most reflective of children's rights and it includes a direct reference to the UNCRC. This curriculum was released 25 years after Canada ratified the UNCRC. It is a gratifying finding to see that children's rights are finally permeating into how children are viewed by curriculum developers.

Not all the general principles (United Nations, 2005) have been incorporated to the same extent within the kindergarten curricula. Of the four general principles, Article 2, the right to non-discrimination (United Nations, 2005) is the one that is most embedded in the curricula. The least reflected principle within the four documents is Article 12, children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them and to have their views taken into consideration (United Nations, 2005). Findings show that Article 3, the best interests of the child (United Nations, 2005) and Article 6, the right to life, survival, and development (United

Nations, 2005), were evident in the four documents, with slight progress made from program to program.

Both the FDELK (OME, 2010/2011) and the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) explicitly recognize children as rights holders, a view that was not evident in the previous two kindergarten curricula. However, in concordance with the observations made by Di Santo and Kenneally (2014), the question is if this will be enough to remind educators that children are right holders. Taking into consideration that plenty of educators are not familiar with the UNCRC and its implementation in kindergarten, it is recommended that educators implement a “rights-integrative approach” (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014, p. 404) as a way to incorporate children’s rights into their day-to-day practice in kindergarten. This process would not be achieved without facing challenges. In order to effectively implement a rights-integrative approach, educators must be aware and educated in children’s rights as this would help with the integration of the UNCRC into the curricula and in classroom practice. Furthermore, there seems to be a misconception among some educators who believe that by respecting the children’s right to express their views and to have their views taken into consideration may in return undermine their authority and destabilise the school environment (Lundy, 2007).

Limitations

This study has three main limitations. First, the study did not include a second researcher in the process of analyzing and coding the document. An analysis

of the level of agreement between both researchers could provide further validity to the findings. Secondly, the researcher's views on children as active participants of their own reality could have affected how the curricula documents were perceived as falling short in their inclusion of children's voices within the curricula. Lastly, the analysis is directly affected by the socio-historic moment in which we are living and the current conceptualization of children's rights.

Future Research

Future research should consider including classroom observations to further understand how children's rights are enacted by educators in their practice. There should also be an effort to determine the best way to train educators about the UNCRC and how to effectively implement children's rights in their day-to-day classroom activities. Even with a full integration of the UNCRC in the kindergarten curricula, without the educators' understanding of and respect for children's rights, effectively integrating rights will be a challenge.

Conclusion

The integration of children's rights in Ontario's kindergarten curricula has increased since Canada's ratification of the UNCRC. Even though the four general principles have been embedded to a different extent in the kindergarten curricula, the consideration of children's rights has clearly increased overtime in the Ontario's kindergarten curricula. The sign of progress is promising; however, there is still work to do in order to thoroughly incorporate the rights of the child in the province's curricula.

The depiction of children has also evolved through the different programs. While there is an attempt to incorporate children's voices into the planning of day-to-day activities, children's opinions are circumscribed to whatever space the educators provide for it. Without thoroughly incorporating Article 12 in the design of the curricula, children will not be able to freely express their points of view and opinions on matters that affect them; therefore, their rights would not be entirely respected.

Children's rights education is not included as a learning outcome in the current version of the kindergarten program. This clearly represents a problem and is understandable given that both teachers and early childhood educators are still not required to study children's rights during their pre-service training.

The "rights-integrative approach" (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014, p. 404) encourages educators to assess how children's rights are central to early years curricula. This approach could help educators and policymakers increase and improve the integration of children's rights in Ontario's kindergarten curricula. Furthermore, by incorporating children's rights education in both pre-service education and the learning objectives of kindergarten curricula, children, educators, families and the general public would be more aware of the implications of the UNCRC and more importantly that children are right holders.

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