

Final Report: C22-7371 (SEY2KT)

Strengthening Early Years to Kindergarten Transitions

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1. Context

Strengthening Early Years to Kindergarten Transitions (SEY2KT) is a community and school district partnership designed to support BC children and their families in a local community by strengthening early years to Kindergarten transitions. SEY2KT increases the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and information about transition practices and experiences, analyzing possible barriers in both school and community systems and works toward enabling conditions (e.g., shared pedagogical practices, joint professional learning opportunities.)

The project was initiated in 2018-19 at 6 sites in 6 School Districts; then expanded to 12 School Districts the following year. After two years of consistently positive research findings (2020-2022), and the strong endorsement of both community and school district partners, the Ministry is expanding the project to include 37 School Districts in the 2022-2023 school year.

Research reports from 2019 to 2021 can be found at cr4yr.com

Regional sessions 2017

SEY2K reflected key themes that emerged from eight regional sessions, held in 2017 with over 1500 participants from across BC that identified the need to:

- Increase the use of **restorative transition policies & practices** that are strength-based, child & family-focused, holistic, and emphasize the importance of cultural identity
- Establish a local **context for partnership, strong relationships, and collaboration** in planning and decision-making
- **Include children and families in the collaboration process** as well as a broad range of professionals that the family identifies as critical to include
- Work collaboratively to **increase the exchange of knowledge, experiences and information** about transition practices and experiences by creating ongoing communities of practice – at every level.
- Identify and address the barriers in ‘both systems’ and determine what would be **enabling conditions** (e.g., shared pedagogical practices, joint professional learning opportunities)

OECD

Additionally, SEY2KT was grounded in research findings from OECD (2015):

OECD research: Transitions from Early Childhood Education to Primary School

The transition from early childhood education to primary school is a big step for all children, and a step that more and more children have to take. Quality transitions should be well prepared and child-centred, managed by trained staff

collaborating with one another, and guided by an appropriate and aligned curriculum. Transitions like these enhance the likelihood that the positive impacts of early learning and care will last through primary school and beyond.

OECD research: Successfully Transforming Education Jurisdictions embrace a ‘Learning Leadership’ model

Successfully transforming education jurisdictions embrace a ‘learning leadership’ model where all system partners work *collaboratively* to shift programs, policies, and practices simultaneously in thoughtful and sustainable ways. The Ministry of Education becomes a collaborative learning partner; rather than an ‘authority’ over field processes (OECD, 2015)

The Early Learning Framework

With the publication of revised *Early Learning Framework* (2019), SEY2K increased the focus on on-going collaborative professional learning in order to better support children as they transition from community-based early care and learning to kindergarten contexts.

“We learned that everybody is at a different point in their journey with the Early Learning Framework (ELF) and in their careers and experience. It was really lovely to see how the diverse group came together to share experiences, perspective and learn from one another.”

<https://www.compassionatesystemsleadership.net/sey2kt-20-21>

2. Participation

Twelve communities/school districts, comprising 222 educators participated in SEY2KT in 2021-2022. Most of these were in their second or third years as SEY2KT sites; six of them had been participating in SEY2KT for three years or more.

Each group met regularly with their community partners to design and plan activities that would enhance transitions within their community and submitted monthly reports to the SEY2KT researcher. For most the year, meetings were held virtually to ensure everyone would be able to attend. (A list of community partners is provided in the next section.)

An increasing number of families participated; the use of technology made it difficult to determine numbers, as many families connected through websites, Facebook Groups, e-mail, and media products such as videos designed for all incoming K children. Videos that introduced children and families to school and classroom (sometimes narrated by older children) were particularly popular. Through virtual connections, as well as real-time activities, and gradual-entry K, we estimate that as many as 2000 children participated in at least one transition activity.

Within the 12 sites, teams developed a variety of ways to engage families and strengthen connections between families, schools and the community. Because of COVID-19 protocols, teams increasingly used technology to make these connections, and continued to explore ways of meeting out of doors.

Teams also had the opportunity to participate in Compassionate Systems Leadership (CSL) training sessions, presented by Joanne Schroeder and Pippa Rowcliffe (UBC). These sessions focused on *collaboration and strengthening of relationships across the education and early years sectors*. Information about CSL and reports from each SEY2KT site appears on the CSL website:

<https://www.compassionatesystemsleadership.net/sey2kt-20-21>

3. Research

As in previous years, research on the processes and impact of SEY2KT was a collaborative process involving both local sites and overall SEY2KR project:

- **Team self-assessment:** Teams at each site completed a self-assessment based on factors identified during the pilot that contribute to successful projects.
- **Monthly reports.** Teams submitted brief monthly summaries of their actions and plans that often included artefacts illustrating their work. These reports also tracked the number of educators; children; families and community organizations involved

The researcher offered brief feedback, and mid-project, developed a summary and written feedback for each team that helped some teams modify their approach.

- **Sharing on regular video conferences.** Teams provided informal reports where they shared their activities and progress on both CSL and SEY2KT with the other sites.
- **Compassionate System Leadership (CSL) reports.** Each team presented a 10-minute report on their experiences and observations as part of the CSL initiative. While these did not involve all participants and were not a formal part of the evaluation, they offered insights that provided additional background for the evaluation. The reports are posted on the CSL site.<https://www.compassionatesystemsladership.net/sey2kt-20-21>

4. The Themes

Research and analysis in 2020-221 confirmed the four themes of interest that had been tentatively identified in 2020:

Collaborating and creating partnerships
Welcoming families into the school community
Going out into the community
Creating communities of practice

Because of COVID-19 protocols, groups were often unable to interact directly with families, community partners and team members in ways they had anticipated but they continued to find innovative ways to engage and collaborate:

4.1 Collaborating and creating partnerships

Groups/teams continued to find broader and deeper ways to engage with their partners and their community, and to support transitions. Observations over time indicate that this is probably the strongest area of growth. For example, in the first year of the project, several groups did not really have a working partnership outside of the education community; now most groups have several partners who play a larger and larger role in their work.

Partnerships are both wider and deeper --- there are more and more active partners; they are involved in increasingly diverse ways; and they play a larger and larger role in planning, making decisions, facilitating the groups, and designing and leading activities. Often, district teams are co-chaired by an educator from the school district and someone from the community.

One participant commented: *We are becoming a team with shared successes and connections*
Another noted: *We have common goals- we all want families to feel welcome, supported, and aware of available community resources*

The monthly summaries indicate that communication and collaboration are becoming two-way processes at many sites where both school and community participants are enriching each other and widening perspectives. For example, at one site, a different partner presents at each meeting, offering insights into their organization's goals, values, successes, challenges, key activities and aspirations. *We discovered that we didn't really know what're organization do*, commented one participant. *So how could we support each other and keep families informed about what is available in our community!*

CSL has been an important tool is helping to create the trust and connections that support the work both among members of each site team, and across teams from different sites.

Teams in every district have faced challenges to their partnerships from COVID-19 and the protocols governing interactions. In the first two years of SEY2KT, sharing food was a key strategy for building community in several places; this year, individuals and groups often commented on how much they hoped to get back to the sharing and connection of a simple act like having lunch together.

Community partners 2021-22

Regional coalitions

- Columbia Basin for Literacy
- EY Coalition Coordinator
- South Peace Community Resources Society

Community Services

- Options (Surrey)
- Child Development Society (REACH)
- Family Services
- Intercultural Association (SWIS)
- Family Resource Society (Sooke)
- Child Care Societies (Alberni Valley)
- Family Outreach

Community members

Private preschools/day care

Early Learning and Care Consultant

Indigenous

- Metis Nation BC
- EY Indigenous Council
- Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers
- Friendship Centres (Fraser Region)
- Young Warriors (Victoria Native Friendship Centre)
- Tribal School
- Tsarlip HS facilitators
- Sooke Nation Preschool

Centre for Child Development LM

BC Government

- Child Care Resources and Referral
- MCFD
- Interior health; Vancouver Coastal Health
- EY navigator (Family Hub)

Library

Preschools/Childcare

- Outdoor Preschool (Saplings)
- Community daycare/preschool educators

Students (Volunteers)

- E.g., North island College; Secondary Alberni District Secondary School)
- private preschools (Kingfisher in Sooke)

School District Participants 2021-22

District administrators

- Assistant Superintendent
- principals and vice-principals
- Directors of Instruction

District Services

- Indigenous Community Coordinator
- Community Schools Coordinator
- =Early Learning leads

Strong Start Facilitators /ECEs

- At Strong Start Centres
- In K Classrooms

K and K/1 educators

- classroom teachers
- Language teachers
- Teachers of English Language Learners

Principals and vice-principals

Support workers

- Indigenous classroom support worker
- SWIS workers

Student Services

4.2 Welcoming families into the school community

Traditionally, transition activities have focused on offering activities and programs that bring young children and their families into the school before they start Kindergarten. Within SEY2KT these activities continue to be important, but transition activities are increasingly likely to focus on ongoing events and relationships. Some teams have established a regular schedule of events that involve both children who are currently attending school and younger children. Many of these are part of an extended “welcome” or “transition” program that takes place over several weeks, and, for example, invites children to *Play your way to K*.

Some specific examples in 2021-22 include:

- Having Strong Start children join the Kindergarten class for an hour each Thursday at the end of the day
- Hollyburn primary choir where families, Kindergarten and Strong Start children come together once a week to sing
- Gardening where Strong Start and Kindergarten children have been working together to plant, care for, and label a garden of native plants
- Play your Way to K – a four-part series where Early Learners play and learn in a Kindergarten classroom
- A week-long, virtual, nature-focused literacy event, with “enchanted back packs” scavenger hunts, food and recipes.
- Bringing the pumpkin patch to the children – facilitators created a “pumpkin patch” in the school yard
- Shared community walks with early learners, K children and educators (in at least one place, this included children from a local day care.)

All these activities are designed to build community for early learners before they even start school. One teacher remarked: ***There is no transition if you are already used to being there!***

We are making relationships and connections with new families, and we are hopeful and excited to support them on their journey

As families are picking up bags and the prizes they won, they are becoming aware of services in the community that they did not know about before.

Families appreciated the opportunity to be in the school in a different way, connecting to place,

4.3 Going out into the community

Groups continue to be energetic and innovative in finding ways to connect with families outside of the school building, often through a “Pop-up” (frequently “virtual”) where they go into community spaces (e.g., parks) and offer opportunities for children to play. Over the three years of the program, these have been challenging to develop, but very successful and appreciated. And fun! They also help to raise the visibility of young children in the community.

Examples in 2021-22 included:

- After a Story Workshop, posting children’s stories on large weather-resistant poster boards
- Sharing photos and artefacts in displays at local coffee shops
- The ever-popular pop-up play – now often hosted by community partners
- Having exchange visits (outside) with local day care sites (e.g., story walks)
- Sharing videos (e.g., grade 5 students provide narration to a video showing K classrooms).

Technology: going out or coming in?

- Virtual strong start, where facilitators live-streamed Strong Start activities; the school provided materials for children who were registered
- A video link where children could click on bitmojis to explore Kindergarten classrooms and experience songs, stories, art projects and other activities
- A video, *A Day in the life of Kindergarten*, where children could watch and learn about the Kindergarten they would be attending

Families in many communities received bags of learning resources, along with suggestions about how to use them.

4.4 Creating communities of practice

Several groups are making strong progress in developing shared Pro-D activities, and some have been able to plan together for 2022-2023 when they anticipate that they will be able to meet in person.

These activities fall into a variety of categories, for example:

- Agreeing as a group to highlight some common practices (for example, participants at one site have agreed to highlight play; indigenous teachings; and outdoor learning in all contexts, conversations; and presentations)
- Following an annual plan or cycle where educators come together to co-create and co-facilitate
- Using common resources (e.g., ELF)

- Engaging in common practices (e.g., having children and families create their own *Wonderful Me* posters)

Groups have had to be flexible and inventive to find ways to work together. For example, at some sites, they have re-arranged the time of their professional learning activities to allow ECEs to participate; in others, districts have organized dinner meetings, where all participants receive appropriate payment for attending. All of these solutions are developed locally to fit the context and circumstances of the local site,

In addition, participants' common experience with *Compassionate Systems Leadership* helps to create a foundation of practices for working together and offering leadership and mentorship to each other.

Finally, several groups noted that an Early Learning Lead is often the key to common practice.

Hiring an Early Learning Lead has been a big step forward for us- you can't do this without someone on the ground!

5. What have we learned?

- Our communities and schools are united by a profound desire to support young children and their families in feeling secure and joyful as they transition into school.
- Educators and community partners are inventive and tenacious in finding ways to sustain and extend important early childhood experiences.
- Communities are developing and tailoring strategies that reflect their unique strengths, interests, and needs.
- Given time and support, school/community teams are able to extend their work more broadly and deeply, engaging more people and creating changes that “stick.”
- Those working to make changes thrive on developing new leadership skills and strategies, such as those offered by CSL.
- Local leadership and support (“on the ground”) such as that provided by Early learning Leads is important factor.
- Those working for change at a local level are extremely appreciative of opportunities to connect and exchange ideas with others working in similar contexts.
- This is joyful work!