

Final Report

Listening to the Voices of Kindergarten Teachers, Early Childhood Educators, and Young Children on their Experiences of the Kindergarten-ECE Partnership in Sooke School District Kindergarten Classrooms



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I like playing with the parachute in the gym with my friends and my teachers – it's so much fun!

Kinsley, Age 5

Acknowledgments

The researchers wish to acknowledge the traditional territories of the Coast Salish: T'Sou-ke Nation, Scia'new Nation, and Nuu-chah-nulth Pacheedaht Nation within which the Sooke School District operates. We also respectfully acknowledge the kindergarten children, early childhood educators, and kindergarten teachers who graciously welcomed us to their classrooms and shared their perspectives so willingly.

Executive Summary

Since 2018, the Sooke School District has utilized a teacher-early childhood educator partnership to optimize children's first year in kindergarten. We listened to individuals involved in such an educational partnership in two different schools, as well as the children in these classrooms.

Our findings are that:

- Teachers and educators felt that the partnership provided the mutual support needed to establish a caring environment that could attend to both individual and group learning
- Teachers and educators expressed that the value of early education is not always appreciated for its impact on how children will view their school experience
- The children understood that “two teachers” meant there was “more help” for everyone
- The skills and knowledge provided by an early childhood educator is not always visible in the larger picture, as mentioned in the Colwood discussion

The importance of creating a rich and positive first formal school experience for each child can make a difference to their subsequent years in school.

Introduction

In 2012, the Sooke School District began the Nature Kindergarten (NK) program. To ensure an optimal learning environment for the children as they learned outside, an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) was hired to work alongside the classroom teacher.

In the first two years of the Nature Kindergarten program at Sangster Elementary School, the partnership received support from a steering committee and Dr. Enid Elliot (Camosun College) who visited the program on a weekly basis to learn and play with the children and educators (Elliot, 2019; Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018). The program provided the children with a good start on their educational journey (Elliot et al., 2014). Part of the success was the collaboration of the teacher and ECE.

In the fall of 2017, a second Nature Kindergarten program was initiated at Saseenos Elementary School, resulting in the formation of a second Kindergarten teacher-ECE partnership. The Sooke School District leadership team considered the Sangster partnership to be successful and replicated that model at Saseenos.

In both settings, the skills and knowledge of the ECE supported and enhanced the teacher's expertise and provided support for the children's start to school. In 2018, the district built upon this success and eight additional Kindergarten – ECE partnerships were developed in regular kindergarten programs. In 2021, a guiding framework (Figure 1) was collaboratively developed by the teachers, ECEs, school district personnel from the Sooke School District Curriculum Department, and additional stakeholders.

The Early Learning & Child Care Department in the Sooke School District currently supports 15 Kindergarten teacher – ECE partnerships, including the Nature Kindergartens and other early childhood programs and initiatives.

Impact of the Kindergarten-ECE Partnership on the Broader Community

Research has consistently revealed that investment in early childhood education produces positive returns for the child, the family, and the broader community (Geelhoed et al., 2020; Heckman, Garcia, Ermini Leaf, & Prados, 2019). Benefits of positive early childhood education experiences in the short term include the development of resilience, improved cognitive skills, reduced school absenteeism, and reduced risk of disease. Longer term benefits of early intervention have shown to be significant across multiple sectors including health, education, and social welfare (Geelhoed et al., 2020).

Research indicates that children who have experienced early years interventions may have better employment pathways, improved health, and reduced dependency on welfare, which have the potential to result in reductions in inequality (Reynolds et al., 2017).

In relation to the efficacy of a co-teaching model (teacher and ECE in kindergarten classrooms), qualitative studies have identified factors that are beneficial in a co-teaching model. These

factors include having positive administrative support, planning time, training, and the compatibility of the team members (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). A co-teaching kindergarten model initiated in another Canadian school district (Underwood et al., 2016) identified planning time and professional development as critical to the co-teaching model, with varying degrees of administrative support for their work. Underwood et al. (2016) noted that the power dynamics in relationships were important for both kindergarten teachers and ECEs. For ECEs to be contributors, and for the children to be beneficiaries of their expertise, the adult participants in this study stated that their relationship needed to be grounded in respect and communication (Scruggs et al., 2007). This was also a significant finding from our data.

Research Process

Our intent was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the teachers, ECEs, and children, and their perspectives on those experiences, in this unique model of early education in a public school system. We hoped to be able to explore the lived experiences of these teachers and ECEs who support kindergarten children's learning and development. We also wanted to document the children's understandings of this partnership in the classroom by asking them to share their perspectives on the learning and environment through modes (e.g., storytelling, conversation, drawing) of their choosing. We spent time in the classroom and were able to observe the relationship between the ECE and teacher and their interactions with the children.

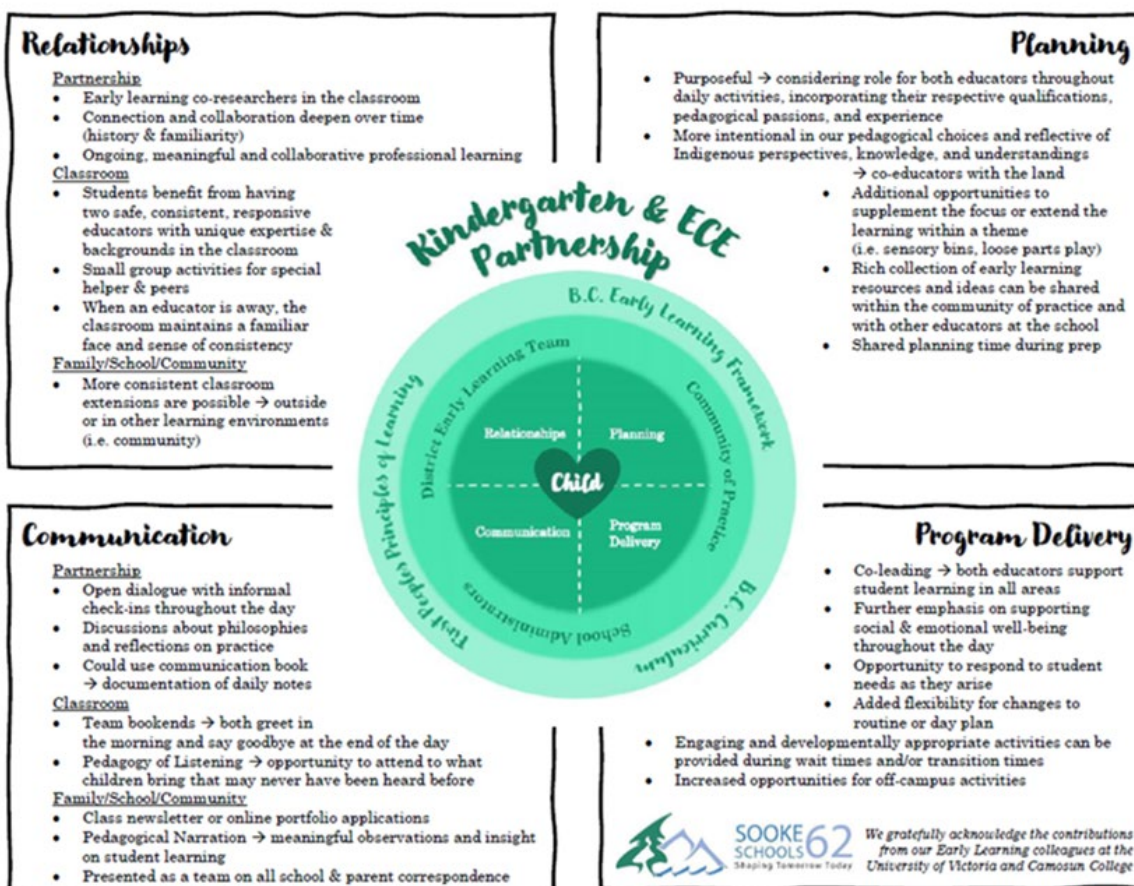
In this study, the researchers collected data in two kindergarten classrooms using the following data collection methods: observations; participant-observations (e.g., playing with the children); conversations with the adults and children; and the collection of children's multimodal texts (e.g., drawings, oral stories).

The objectives of this study were:

- i) to examine the ways kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators collaborated in their practice with young learners, including learning of the highlights and challenges of this partnership;
- ii) to investigate the impact of this pedagogical model on the children who are experiencing this partnership in the classroom by asking them to share their views on their learning and learning environment;
- iii) to assemble and analyze the personal narratives from the kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, and children which will contribute to our evolving understanding of the importance of creating supportive and inclusive spaces for young children that promote interconnected learning and relationships; and,
- iv) to develop new ways of thinking and being in relation to supporting kindergarten children, and the impact and possibilities of collaborative partnerships with early childhood educators in kindergarten classrooms to foster intercultural understanding, curiosity, wonder, and mutual respect.

Figure 1

Kindergarten and ECE Partnership Model: Sooke School District



Research Participants

The research participants included two Kindergarten teachers (Andrea Battistoni – Willway Elementary School; Michelle Chow – Colwood Elementary School) and two Early Childhood Educators (Monique Paulson – Willway; Anne Sahota – Colwood). Andrea has a Master of Education in Early Childhood Education and Michelle has a Master of Education in Language & Literacy Education. Monique and Anne have both received education in early childhood learning and development. Both ECEs were very familiar with the school communities as they were the former StrongStart¹ educators at their respective schools. All the adults took part in multiple conversations throughout the study regarding their perspectives on the teacher-ECE partnership.

¹ “StrongStart BC programs provide rich learning environments designed for early learning development – language, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional. Qualified early childhood educators lead learning activities where children find opportunities to make friends and interact with others of similar ages.”

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/early-learning/support/programs/strongstart-bc>

The ECEs were not in the kindergarten classrooms full-time. Anne was in the kindergarten classroom 53% of the week (she was also assigned to other primary classrooms in the school), and Monique was in the kindergarten classroom 70% of the week (she was also assigned to another primary classroom and the school library). The teachers and ECEs provided informed consent to participate in this project.

Across both classrooms, 25 families provided consent for their child to participate. The children were 5 and 6 years old, and several of the children received additional Educational Assistant and English Language Learning support. Some children also had Individual Education Plans. In addition to receiving adult caregivers' consent for their children to participate in the study, the researchers also acquired the children's assent to engage in discussions with them about their classroom experiences. The children shared their views on the model through conversations, and by creating drawings and sharing stories of their experiences in the classroom.

Context & Site Visits

Data were collected with the participating kindergarten classes at Willway Elementary School by Dr. Jodi Streelasky, and at Colwood Elementary School by Dr. Enid Elliot. Both schools have an enrollment of students from Kindergarten-Grade 5 and have StrongStart programs.

The full-day and half-day site visits took place in the kindergarten classrooms, outdoor school playgrounds, outdoor classroom, school garden, and at Witty's Lagoon Regional Park:

Colwood Elementary School Site Visits:

- May 2, 9, 16, 27, June 4, 11, 18, 2024

Willway Elementary School Site Visits:

- February 21, March 4, April 15, May 7, 28, June 7, 17, 24, 2024

Findings

The partnerships

Based on our observations and through conversations with the participants, it was obvious that both partnerships were grounded in principles of mutual respect and admiration, and both teaching teams were caring, supportive, and purposeful in their interactions with the children. Both partnerships shared their perspectives on their collaboration, the skill set each brought to the classroom, and their views on early learning, care, and development. In one context, the teacher and ECE described their relationship as “being like a marriage.” In both partnerships, we observed the ease and comfort the teaching teams had with each other, most likely due to their long-standing partnerships in the kindergarten classroom, and their compatible views on teaching, children, and how to effectively work together.

Due to the composition and complexity of both kindergarten classrooms, both teaching teams expressed their desire to have the ECE in the classroom full-time. Children arrive in kindergarten from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with a variety of social skills and different emotional needs. The teachers and ECEs often discussed the social-emotional development of children and felt this aspect of children's development played a central role in planning their pedagogy.

All team members were able to discuss their values and philosophies of early childhood education and come to a common understanding and approach while also appreciating each other's strengths. The partnership model enabled the educators to share their perspectives on children, approaches to behaviour, and on ways to negotiate the rhythm and movement of the day with each other. They appreciated having another professional in the classroom to discuss plans for individual children and communicate with families.

Finally, the teams shared how each member brought knowledge of educational practice from different fields that complemented each other, enabling a rich experience for the educators, children, and families. Both teaching teams hoped to provide continuity for the children and their intent was to build the children's trust and feelings of safety within the classroom.

What was heard: Colwood School Teacher and Early Childhood Educator

Michelle and Anne were eager to share their experiences. They spoke passionately of their work together. In our discussion they often finished each other's sentences and expanded on each other's points. Conversation flowed easily back and forth. It was clear that they had had many deep discussions about children, education, and their collaboration and was focused on children's holistic growth and development.

The teacher and ECE felt that children needed to learn a certain amount of compliance to succeed in school; children had to follow directions and understand school, as well as individual teacher's expectations. In kindergarten, children have to learn to walk down the hall quietly, get into line, shift to accommodate the "bell", tidy up for next activity, take care of themselves (put on coats, shoes, put away lunch). Children also must learn to wait, shift attention, and follow the "rules." Holding these ideas in one's head and knowing when to do what requires a certain level of maturity that not all children will have achieved by the time they arrive at kindergarten.

To support children both individually and as members of a group, Michelle may have led an activity while Anne documented or supported a particular child; sometimes it was the other way around. They trusted each other and played to each other's strengths as they knew each other well.

Together, they felt they were able to offer the children more opportunities than if there was only one teacher in the classroom. As they worked together, they felt that they were able to better support children's social and emotional well-being. Michelle mentioned that she felt less "burnt out" having Anne in the classroom to discuss children and families and to offer a variety of

activities. They shared a “child first philosophy” and felt that hugging or a reassuring hand on a child was completely congruent with their shared philosophy.

Michelle and Anne discussed how many of the kindergarten children are missing consistent out-of-school connections in their family lives and that school is their connection to the larger community.

What was heard: Willway School Teacher and Early Childhood Educator

Andrea and Monique displayed a natural ease with each other and were happy to share their experiences in the classroom. They both enjoyed learning from each other, supporting each other, and they engaged with the kindergarten children in respectful, calm, and engaging ways. Their commitment to early learning, young children’s social and emotional well-being, and children’s overall holistic development was evident during each visit.

As previously stated, supporting and scaffolding the children’s social-emotional development was a significant focus of the teaching team. Assisting the children in problem-solving, self-regulation, and supporting and nurturing respectful peer relationships were consistently observed in the classroom. Documenting the children’s growth in these areas was also evident, as displays of the children’s artwork, conversations, and other forms of learning were visible throughout the classroom. The teaching team also valued outdoor engagement and play and recognized how many of the kindergarten children benefitted from the wide, open spaces of the playground, the forested area in front of the school, and local outdoor field trips.

The pedagogical model used by the teaching team was child-centred and balanced. Andrea and Monique both read storybooks to the children, modelled how to participate in new learning activities, and when there was conflict in the classroom between children or a group of children, both adults took turns helping resolve issues.

Throughout the data collection sessions, it was obvious that Andrea and Monique were a cohesive team in the classroom, and their relationship was grounded in mutual respect. Another strong component of their bond was the humour and laughter they displayed when relaying stories about their experiences with the children, and their enjoyment of working with each other. Their dedication to early learning, young children, and their families make them an exemplary teaching team who provided children with optimal learning experiences in a safe, welcoming, and caring environment.

What was heard: Challenges

Both teaching teams identified challenges to their partnership.

While they viewed kindergarten as critical to children’s educational experience, they felt that this understanding was not always shared by their colleagues or the community in general.

In both schools the ECE's experienced being pulled to other classrooms due to staff absences or other identified needs. Teachers in other kindergarten or Grade 1 classrooms needed another skilled person to help support the learning in the classroom.

Michelle also noted that it was important for her to let go some of the control in the classroom planning and activities so that she and Anne could have a partnership and share the power in the classroom. However, this could be a challenge in some partnerships.

What was heard: The children's perspectives

In our research, both the adults and children were provided with opportunities to share their perspectives on this unique pedagogical approach/teaching model in a kindergarten classroom. We believe providing opportunities for young children to share their views on their lived experiences in the classroom has the potential to transform teachers' and ECEs' pedagogical practice and impact the way these adults support, value, and celebrate young children's experiences and development. We believe this is significant, as historically, young children have rarely been asked to share their perspectives on their school experiences in research. Many contemporary early childhood researchers view children as competent experts on their own experiences who actively shape their own lives, cultures and spaces (Lansdown, 2005, United Nations, 1989). In this study, we drew on this perspective by asking the young children to share their experiences through drawings and conversations about their lived experiences in kindergarten.

Willway Elementary School

The kindergarten children at Willway Elementary School articulated their thoughts in multiple ways that included individual and group conversations with the researcher, and by drawing images of what they liked best about school and the kindergarten teacher - ECE partnership. The following three images and narratives represent a snapshot of the data.



Figure 2: We are going to the campsite at school with both my teachers – I really like being outside.

Charlotte, Age 5

Figure 3



Figure 3: I like going outside and making concrete on the playground. I like having two teachers because they let us play with toys and police stuff.

Jaxton, Age 5

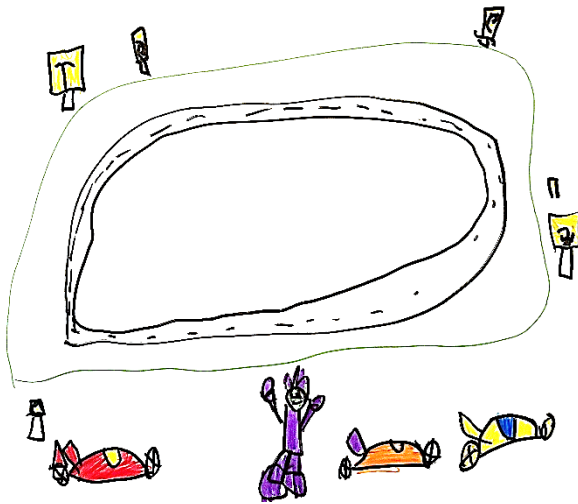


Figure 4: I love playing with cars on the carpet with my friends. I like having two teachers because then there's more people to help!

Maddox, Age 6

Colwood Elementary School

The children at Colwood also shared their views on school and on having a kindergarten teacher and early childhood educator in the classroom. In small groups, and sometimes using puppets, the children discussed what they might tell someone about kindergarten.

The children met in two groups of four or five to share their thoughts on kindergarten and their perspectives on having a teacher and ECE. When asked what they might tell another child about kindergarten, both groups acknowledged they were scared when they started kindergarten. One child felt “shy and nervous,” another “felt weird,” and one child said she was “sad to leave her

preschool.” One child wanted to be in Ms. Chow’s class because she knew she was a “good teacher.” The children liked both Ms. Chow and Ms. Anne; one said that “Ms. Anne makes me laugh,” and another said, “Ms. Chow is nice.” Children in one group said that having two teachers was better because more people are helped. Other comments were that the “teachers keep you safe,” “make you feel better when you are sad,” and “help you learn.” One child said that the “teachers talk it out with us.”

The children all agreed there was a great deal to learn in kindergarten; they had to learn about writing, painting, and counting, and “when to talk”, “not to throw wood chips,” “to be safe and to be kind,” and “to push in your seat.” As it was the end of the school year when they spoke to the interviewer, they felt they were “used to it” and that they had friends and school was “fun.”

At Colwood, the ECE cooked with the children once a week, did a weekly nature walk, and engaged the children in gardening in the school gardens; the teacher focused on the literacy and numeracy activities. While each adult had taken on responsibility for certain activities, either of them could transition to support a group activity while the other supported a child who needed attention. If a particular child was struggling, either of the adults could help them so that an activity or lesson could continue. Several times, one adult focused on a child who was struggling emotionally or who did not understand the expectations due to language or comprehension problems, while the other carried on the activity with the group. This collaboration minimized disruptions.

Discussions with the children and observations in the classrooms made it clear that children felt comfortable and safe with both adults in their classroom; some even articulated an awareness that more children could be helped when there was another adult in the room. The collaboration of ECE and teacher seemed to be a positive step to insure the children were able to truly engage with school and feel that it was a welcoming space for them. Both teacher and ECEs have the knowledge and skills to support the group as well as individual children. These abilities overlapped and reinforced each other. Developing a positive image of school and feeling validated as learners can help to start a child’s school experience on a positive note.

Discussion

While this was a small study, we clearly heard from teachers and ECEs that there were significant benefits of the partnership model for the teachers, educators, and children.

We found that the positive impacts of this partnership related to the participants feeling highly effective in their work, valued and supported in their roles, and respected and celebrated for their expertise and deep investment in the children’s holistic learning. Being able to work within a relationship of trust and collegiality, the teachers and educators were able to use their skills and knowledge together to create a caring learning environment.

The children seemed to understand that having “two teachers” enabled them to engage in more diverse learning experiences in a safe environment; “two teachers” meant “more help.” Having two engaged and supportive educators in the classroom was perceived by the children to be a benefit. “Two teachers” meaning “more help” was also confirmed during our observations of the adults and children engaging with each other in the classroom, on the school playground, in the garden and outdoor classroom, and on a field trip to the beach. Both school partnerships addressed the importance of the presence of two consistent educators, both teacher and ECE, who brought their own sophisticated understanding of children into the classroom and outdoors.

Our hope is that the knowledge shared from this study will assist administrators, school district personnel, and policy makers to become more aware of, and value, the importance of creating a rich and positive first formal school experience for each child *through the creation of teacher/ECE partnerships*. We also note the value of drawing on various pedagogical approaches, inclusive practices and teaching models, such as the teacher–ECE model that supports children's overall development and might help provided the foundation for a child's future success in school.

Recently, the Sooke School District received a presentation from UBC's Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) research team. HELP monitors the well-being of young children in BC through several measures. Their presentation focused on the Early Development Index (EDI), which asks kindergarten teachers to assess the children they have in their classrooms in terms of language development, physical health, social competences, emotional maturity, and communication skills. Based on the Sooke School District EDI data, the number of children with one or more vulnerabilities entering kindergarten has increased from 33% in 2019/2020 to 41% in 2023/24; the EDI data indicated that almost half of children entering kindergarten needed additional support.

Kindergarten is a child's introduction to the next 12 years of their lives in the public schools. Hopefully, the welcome they receive in their first year makes each child feel they have a place in the school community and provides them with the support they need to succeed.

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Appendix



February 20th, 2024

Information and Consent Letter

Research Project Title: Valuing the Perspectives of Kindergarten Teachers, Early Childhood Educators, and Young Children on the Efficacy of the Kindergarten-ECE Partnership in the Classroom

Dear Potential Participant,

In October 2023, Frances Krusekopf (District Principal, Early Learning & Child Care, Sooke School District) contacted Dr. Enid Elliot (Camosun College) and myself (Dr. Jodi Streelasky, University of Victoria) about the possibility of engaging in a research project that will examine the efficacy of the Kindergarten-ECE partnership in the Sooke School District. In December 2023, Frances, Enid, and I also had a meeting with the outgoing CEO/Superintendent of Schools, Scott Stinson, who supported this research initiative. In this project, we are planning to investigate the ways 2 teaching teams in 2 different Sooke kindergarten classrooms are supporting the children in the classroom, along with challenges (and successes) of this pedagogical model. Dr. Streelasky will visit/collect data in 1 classroom, and Dr. Elliot will visit/collect data in the other classroom. We also plan to ask the kindergarten children about their current experiences with 2 adult supporters in the classroom. Our hope is that this research will enable us to develop new ways of thinking and being in relation to supporting kindergarten children, and the impact and possibilities of collaborative partnerships with early childhood educators in kindergarten classrooms. We are requesting your consent to visit your classroom approximately 6 times (1 visit to introduce ourselves and ask any questions you may have about the research; 1 full-day initial visit; and 4 half-day visits). An additional full or half-day visit may be required to collect data from the children. We are also requesting your consent to participate in 1 interview in the spring of 2024. Our conversation will focus on:

- 1) *the ways you are working with your colleague to support kindergarten children*
- 2) *the barriers or challenges of this pedagogical model*
- 3) *the highlights and successes of this teaching approach*

Confidentiality

If you choose, your identity will be kept confidential. You will also have the option to allow your first name and photograph to be used in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study, the information you provided will not be used in the research and the data will be destroyed. Please contact me (phone: 250 721-6450 or email: jodistre@uvic.ca) if you wish to withdraw from the study.

Risks and Benefits

There are not any foreseeable risks for you in regards to your involvement in this research. The potential benefits of this study to participants and the education community include: i) the kindergarten children you are supporting will be provided with an opportunity to share their perspectives on their school experiences with you; ii) you will be provided with an opportunity to share your journey in relation to supporting kindergarten children in collaboration with a colleague; and, iii) this study will provide information to the broader education community and policy makers on the ways kindergarten children can be supported using a unique and innovative pedagogical model.

However, there is a potential risk of lack of anonymity due to the small participant sample size, and if you choose to include your photograph in a child-friendly book about the study that will be stored in the school library.

All data (interview transcripts) will be stored on password protected digital files (sync.com) on my (Dr. Streelasky) laptop computer that will only be accessed by me and Dr. Elliot. The data will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the study (digital files will be deleted).

Sharing Research Findings

Our intent is to share what we learn from the study with university and college students, teachers and administrators, and colleagues at national and international conferences, such as the European Early Childhood Research Association Conference. The findings will also be shared in peer-reviewed early childhood journals (e.g., *Young Children*), and in a child-friendly book stored in the school library.

Inquiries

I will be happy to answer any questions about the research at any time. Please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail jodistre@uvic.ca or telephone (250) 721-6450.

Concerns

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant while participating in this study, or you wish to verify the ethical approval of this study you can contact the UVIC Human Research Ethics Office (250) 472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Your signature indicates that you freely and willingly give your consent to participate in the study and that you understand your participation in the study. You may withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences.

Your Signature

Consent for your photo to be used in a book about the study that will be stored in the school library (circle one option) YES NO

Sincerely,

J. Stulady

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