In the 1960s, some Canadian universities and colleges established full-day early learning and childcare laboratory schools to support student education and research initiatives in their early childhood education programs (Brophy, 2000). In the 2000s, the number of lab schools declined as ten Ontario colleges closed them, citing high operational costs. More recently, Holland College in Prince Edward Island and the Saskatchewan Polytechnic invested in the establishment of new lab schools. Currently, eight Canadian universities and 12 colleges have early learning laboratory schools. Despite this long history, little is publicly shared about these institutions. In response to this knowledge gap, the Muttart Foundation in Alberta initiated a survey to document key characteristics and purposes of university and college early learning lab schools. This article summarizes some of the survey findings.

For the survey, a lab school was selected according to following criteria:

- provides full-day education and care services;
- is attached to an academic program;
- its manager and staff (or faculty liaison) are employees of the academic institution; and
- its mission is tied to exemplary practices, student mentorship and research.

This criteria excluded long-standing and highly regarded university lab schools at the University of Alberta, University of Concordia, and the University of Toronto/Ontario Institute in Studies in Education, which offer half-day nursery school programs. The University of Victoria childcare centres also did not meet survey criteria, although staff have an active affiliation with faculty in the School of Child and Youth Care.

Informants from the following 11 universities and colleges (out of 14 invited) agreed to participate in survey interviews: Capilano University, Conestoga College, George Brown College (GBC), MacEwan University, Holland College, Humber College, Ryerson University, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Seneca College, University of Guelph and University of New Brunswick.

### Facilities

Most lab schools are located on-campus, but there are exceptions.

- GBC has 11 (10 which are community-based—in hospitals (two), schools (six), a corporate tower and a university international residence, staffed by employees of the college).
- Ryerson University has two lab schools located in the community—a before- and after-school program located in a school and the Gerrard Resource Centre, which offers a family supports program, resource consultancy, emergency childcare and a toy lending library.
- Conestoga College has three locations in the Waterloo Region that provide multiple services.

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1 The term “laboratory school” is criticized because it suggests that children and families are objects of observation and research in a potentially “schoolified” environment. The term is retained here because of its currency, but other terms should be considered.

2 How these lab schools are referred to include Children’s Centre, Childcare Centre, Early Learning Centre, Children’s Day Care Centre, Child Development Centre, Childcare and Learning Centre, and Early Childhood Centre. For this article, the term, early learning lab school or lab school, is used.
Most lab schools were purpose-built rather than established in retrofitted spaces, and some benefit from a large outdoor space designed through funding from foundations (Ryerson and Humber). Several lab schools have community gardens; in one site, the garden is a shared responsibility between the lab school and the School of Nutrition.

Some lab schools have additional functional spaces. Capilano’s academic program has an enclosed art studio space (created out of part of a program classroom) that is used by the children and educators. Four sites—Conestoga, Humber, MacEwan and the University of New Brunswick—have adjacent resource centres where students can borrow toys, equipment and resources to use either in classes or in their field placements with Conestoga also inviting the community to use their resource centre. Seneca College and Conestoga have a classroom in their lab school building used for program classes and Conestoga’s ECE faculty are located in the lab school building. Several lab schools have observation booths, although the University of New Brunswick and Capilano University removed their booths because of concerns about the surveillance of children and educators. Conestoga has replaced observation booths with cameras that connect to classrooms providing technology enabled in-time observations.

Governance and Academic Affiliations

With one exception, the early learning lab schools surveyed are operated by their university or college. Each is linked and integral to a university or college academic program located within a broader academic faculty (e.g., Faculty of Community Services). Survey results show that the day-to-day governance of a lab school—reporting processes and operational decision-making—is complex. Individuals involved in decision-making can include a lab school manager (sometimes referred to as a supervisor); a lab school director who, in some colleges, is responsible for more than one lab school; a faculty liaison director; the academic program chair; the faculty dean; and, potentially, members of the senior management team (e.g., vice-president and/or provost).

Overall, survey results indicate that there are four governance models:

- A lab school manager reports directly to an academic chair, who is accountable to a faculty dean. In this model, a lab school is typically described as a service or program of an academic department.
- The lab school manager reports directly to a faculty dean or another senior manager, although the academic chair and manager meet regularly and faculty in the academic program can be actively engaged in decision-making.
- The lab school manager works closely with an academic program faculty liaison with release time, who reports to either the department chair or dean. In this model, a faculty member (or two, in the case of the University of New Brunswick) acts as the director or as a liaison between the lab school and the academic program; and
- The lab school manager reports to an administrative department. At the University of Guelph, the director of the lab school reports directly to the Vice-president of Student Affairs, and a supervisor reports to the director. However, the director attends the academic program’s curriculum and departmental meetings (Family Relations and Applied Nutrition). In 2015, Holland College transferred responsibility for its early learning lab school from the Health and Community Studies department to Ancillary Services.

There is one exception to these models. The Saskatchewan Polytechnic lab school is run by a board of directors of an external, not-for-profit childcare centre, although it is affiliated with an ECE academic program. The lab school staff are employees of the board of directors, whereas the academic program faculty liaison working with staff and students in the lab school is an employee of Saskatchewan Polytechnic.

A few lab schools have formalized faculty–lab school linkages supported by an academic program budget. For example, at Conestoga College, each semester a different ECE faculty member is linked (referred to as a “lablink”) with an age group in one of the lab schools for approximately 15 hours to connect teaching staff with students and their coursework. At Capilano, the lab school manager works collaboratively with two part-time faculty members who are the atelierista and pedagogista in

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3 Recently, Ryerson established an associate director position to oversee the management, staffing, environment and curriculum in their lab schools.
the Children's Centre (funded under the academic department budget). At Holland College, the faculty liaison's role is to introduce new practices, oversee the experiences of students and be involved with research while a MacEwan faculty member serves as a pedagogical partner for the lab school educators.

**Funding**

Survey results indicate that responsibility for a lab school budget can be assumed at different and/or multiple institutional levels. For example, the Capilano lab school manager works with an operating budget (set by the university) that includes revenue from parent fees and pre-designated funds. Similarly, the University of Guelph operates the lab school budget, but the associated academic department transfers funds to cover some staffing costs. The MacEwan childcare centre budget is part of Retail Services’ budgeting process, with the lab school director reporting to this department on budget matters. The Saskatchewan Polytechnic lab school board of directors receives funding from the college every year to top up the wages of staff as well as to support professional development.

In general, all lab schools seek to recover costs through revenue made up of parent fees. If parent fees make up most of a lab school’s revenue, those fees are typically high in order to offset staff salaries, which are subject to regular increases through collective agreement settlements. However, parent fees are constrained by what the market can bear, and budgets are stretched and often in deficit. Several lab schools have been asked by their institution’s senior management to reduce a deficit on an annual basis or within a projected timeline. Many survey informants report that they are aware of the precarious financial status of their lab schools within a post-secondary educational context of competing priorities.

Most universities and colleges provide in-kind institutional support for their lab school, two lab schools pay for maintenance and cleaning, while one pays for their own overhead (heat, hydro and cleaning). Administrative support (budgeting, purchasing, marketing and human resources) can be provided through institutional systems. In some cases, the academic program covers costs for the lab school such as those related to photo documentation (Conestoga) or materials for the children’s art studio (Capilano). To raise additional revenue, some lab schools engage in fundraising activities with their parent advisory committees.

**Lab School Staffing**

Most lab schools have a mixture of diploma and degree qualified staff. Some staff have post-diploma qualifications (e.g., resource teacher certificate). Exceptions include Ryerson University where staff need a degree qualification in relevant studies and the University of New Brunswick where degree-qualified staff often undertake additional studies (Masters and PhD). In two of the lab schools, all staff are diploma-qualified, and two others have a small number of staff members with assistant certificates. In a majority of lab schools, staff are unionized and well remunerated according to a salary grid that recognizes education, experience and roles staff play in exemplary practice, student mentorship and fostering a research culture. Lab schools uniquely hire students representing a range of academic programs for supply staff. In this respect, lab schools serve as an important part-time employment opportunity for students building their resumes and a valuable training ground for fostering professionalism.
Most full-time lab school staff have planning time, varying from two hours per month to as much as four hours a week. All staff members are expected to engage in professional development opportunities available at the post-secondary institution or in the community. Several lab schools provide three work days a year for professional development. Other centres close for regular PD days, and PD activities can be paid for from the lab school's budget or an academic program and/or the institution may pick up a portion of the cost. Beyond the very important day-to-day work the educators in lab schools do, they may assume other roles and responsibilities, such as teaching evening ECE courses, guest speaking in courses and field supervision. These arrangements, however, may require supply staff to maintain ratio requirements, resulting in additional costs to the lab school.

Leadership Role in Early Childhood Education

All Canadian university and college early learning lab schools have three key roles and responsibilities communicated in their mission statements:

- to offer exemplary programs;
- to supervise and mentor undergraduate students; and
- to create resources for professional development and/or conduct research with children, families and educators.

These roles and responsibilities answer a critical question: Why have university and college early learning lab schools? Survey results show that the lab schools strive to lead the way in the provision and practice of early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Exemplary practice

Increasingly, Canadian families who work or study require accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare services. One survey informant stressed that “without campus lab schools, student families would struggle with their education.” At the University of Guelph, the lab school was ranked by the university community in the top quintile of program prioritization, showing its tremendous value to students, faculty and staff. The lab school as “the heart” of a university or college community was echoed by many informants.

That said, university and college early learning lab schools are much more than an ancillary service—they are models of exemplary practice in pedagogy and equity, diversity and inclusion. All lab schools report that professionals from across the country and around the world visit their centres in recognition of this commitment to exemplary practice. Along with being located in a busy and open campus environment, one informant commented that all these visitors “command daily professionalism [from the staff] and set the bar high for quality.”

Lab schools are considered by the survey informants to be dynamic places of innovation and a testing ground for new curriculum ideas such as inquiry-play-based learning. Many informants reinforced the idea that a lab school is “not a perfect place,” but, instead, is one in which the academic program and the staff take risks and change and evolve as a result of trial and error, reflective practice and a dedication to broadening and deepening understandings of quality, which can, in turn, affect practice and policy. Several ECE academic programs with lab schools, such as GBC, MacEwan University and the University of New Brunswick, have contributed significantly to the creation of provincial early learning curriculum frameworks, thus generating new knowledge about Canadian early childhood pedagogy. The Saskatchewan Polytechnic lab school is a host site for the implementation of Saskatchewan’s 2008 early learning curriculum guide, Play and Exploration. ECE academic programs and their lab schools play a critical role in preparing their students to understand and thoughtfully use an early learning curriculum framework. Moreover, the lab school environment provides the experimental conditions for students to make possible a dynamic ongoing dialogue between the theory and practice of a curriculum framework.

Student Mentorship

While many community early childhood settings open their programs to students, lab schools are unique in the number of students they welcome and the academic orientation they offer. Students have a range of opportunities in lab schools, from field placements and coursework to observations. In three of the universities and colleges surveyed (Guelph, GBC, Holland), all program students have an opportunity to complete at least one field placement in a lab school because of the small size of the student population or the availability of sites.
The Guelph lab school offers an intensive practicum model for all program students. At Ryerson, Seneca, Capilano, Conestoga, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, MacEwan and Humber, fewer students complete a field placement in the lab school. However, Capilano has two community designated practicum sites that take students for a full year (at different times and age groups), building strong relationships among the students, children and placement educators in one site. Conestoga and Ryerson have placed live-feed cameras (with well-defined protocols) in one lab school so that students can see quality, professionalism, day-to-day transitions and routines. These observations play a critical role in the education of students. And students often remark on the value of a lab school in terms of their own learning in the program.

Following Wilcox-Herzog and McLaren's (2012, 5) recommendation that lab schools “need to be deliberate, intentional…to have salience in the institution,” academic programs have innovated other ways to connect students to a lab school. At MacEwan, all students, as part of their course work, are required to create play and learning workshops for children in the lab school. The student reach of university and college lab schools is frequently beyond the ECE academic program. Film and television students complete documentaries about the Humber Lab School. The Holland College lab school connects with other academic programs: a “Teddy Bear Clinic” with Paramedic students, community teaching sessions for the Dental Assisting students and child development for the Child and Youth Care program. In this way, linkages between a living lab school and other academic programs are strengthened so that the lab school is embedded in the life and sustainability of the university or college.

Research and Professional Development

It is common for research to be part of an early learning lab school’s mandate in university settings, but, increasingly, college lab schools are also engaging in research. For example, at Holland College, in partnership with a faculty member from Mount St. Vincent University in Halifax, the lab school took part in applied research that involved the educators posing a research question on outdoor play, followed by data collection, analysis and publication (Dietze et al., 2014). Humber College’s lab school worked with Bloorview Children’s Hospital on a research project focused on at-home language and social supports for young children with autism. At Capilano, Ryerson and Conestoga, the focus has been on conducting research that respectfully seeks the participation of children. Increasingly, lab schools are engaged in applied research that involves interprofessional collaboration between faculty, staff and students from different academic programs. These student experiences prepared ECE and other program graduates to work effectively in diverse settings and with multi-disciplinary teams.

Many lab school staff are invited to develop professional resources, lead workshops or provide consultation for community-based programs. At Conestoga, the lab school staff are an integral component of the ECE Professional Resource Centre working collaboratively with the community to support emerging practices. Professional development can extend beyond the local community: GBC’s School of Early Childhood Education has two long-standing partnerships with ECE programs in Jamaica and China in which lab school staff are integral. Thus, these early learning lab schools are not isolated in academic communities but serve as professional practice models and centres of professional learning for the broader community. Many leaders from lab schools across the country sit on community and government committees, strengthening an often strategic mandate for universities and colleges, which is to establish linkages with community partners. Since 2009, several Canadian lab schools have co-hosted three Leading the Way conferences and a publication (Langford & Di Santo, 2013), featuring conference presentations, that highlights how lab schools play a unique role in the ECEC field.

To make the important work of lab schools—its exemplary practice, student mentorship and role as a research site—further visible to the community, many lab schools regularly communicate and document their activities and pedagogies. Another strategy to enhance the visibility of the lab school is to keep senior management of their institutions well-informed. To quote one lab school director, on-going advocacy is essential; complacency is a “deadly mistake.” Lab school staff must “reconsider, reconceptualize and restructure the ways they fit into the agendas and visions of their universities [and colleges]” (McBride et al., 2012, 162-163).
Survey Summary

Survey results have begun to address a significant gap in our knowledge about Canadian university and college early learning laboratory schools. There is, as evidenced by survey results, wide variation in the size, governance, funding and staffing of lab schools across Canada. From the perspective of survey informants, just like other academic laboratories (e.g., nursing and computer science), investment in lab schools is necessary to enhance its mission. In this way, the reputation of the lab school, the academic program and recognition of faculty who liaison between the program and the lab school as leaders in the practice of professional knowledge is enhanced.

Survey informants reinforced that lab schools are needed for an emerging Canadian ECEC discipline and profession. However, they recognize that they need to make their mission and successes more visible and understandable to their own institutional settings and, more broadly, to the public. All survey informants communicated great confidence and an eagerness to take on these challenges to sustain their early learning lab school for future generations of children, families, students, faculty, researchers, communities and the ECEC field.

References


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