

# Understanding and Supporting Kindergarten Student Thriving



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FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION



# Building a Strong Foundation

- Children's early experiences lay the foundation for lifelong learning, development, health, and well-being
- Kindergarten is an important time in the educational life of children
  - Marks the beginning of the formal education system
  - Entry point for school career



*“The question is no longer if we should help prepare children for school and life beyond, but how.”*

# **”Every child has the right to the best possible childhood”**

(Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007, p. 3)



Equally, we could argue that every child has the right to the best possible education and early school experiences.

It is not enough for children to merely  
“get by” at school...





Rather, every child should be encouraged and supported to succeed, reach their full potential, and ***thrive***.

# Thriving

- Focus on **positive functioning** within a context
- Growing area of research over the last several decades
  - Workplace (e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005)
  - Adolescence (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009)
  - Higher education (e.g., Shreiner, 2010; Coe-Nesbitt et al., 2019)

• *What does it mean to thrive in the early years?*



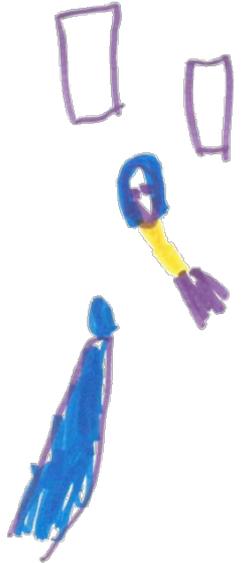
# Purpose

- The purpose of my qualitative study was to understand how student thriving is conceptualized and can be supported within the context of the Ontario Kindergarten classroom from the perspective of three key stakeholders:

Kindergarten  
Students

Educators

Parents



# Brief Overview of Methodology

- Engaged an emergent research design using grounded theory
- Data were collected through a variety of adult- and child-friendly qualitative methods
- Analyzed using a process of constant comparison
  - Codes, categories, themes, theory development

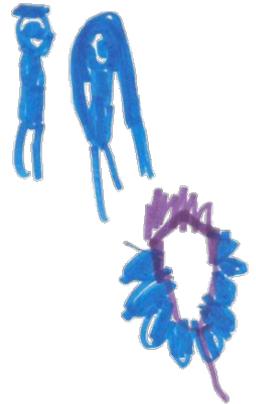


## Parent Perspective

- Semi-structured **interview** with seven **parents** (1 male, 6 female)

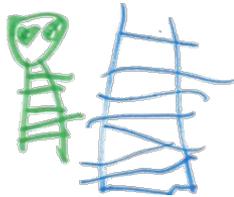
## Educator Perspective

- Semi-structured **interview** and informal conversations with three **educators**
  - Kindergarten teacher, Early Childhood Educator, Head Administrator (Kindergarten educator team)



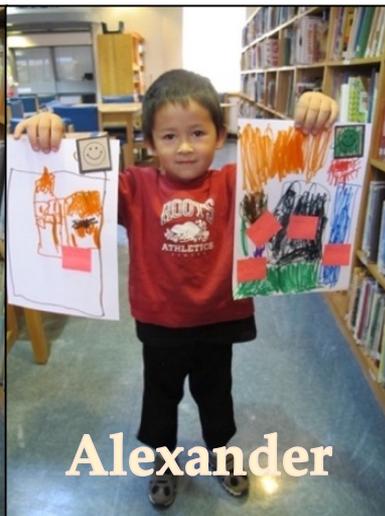
# Student Perspective

- Six focal students
- **Observations** in a Kindergarten classroom (5 full days; ~ 33 hours)
  - Field notes and photographs
- **Drawing exercise** exploring positive and negative aspects of school
  - Designed to elicit views on what may support or obstruct their ability to thrive at school
- Interview with **photo elicitation** and a “**building-a-Kindergarten**” task
  - Designed to elicit children’s views of the elements they saw as being important to supporting student thriving





**Amber**



**Alexander**



**Niall**



**Pippa**

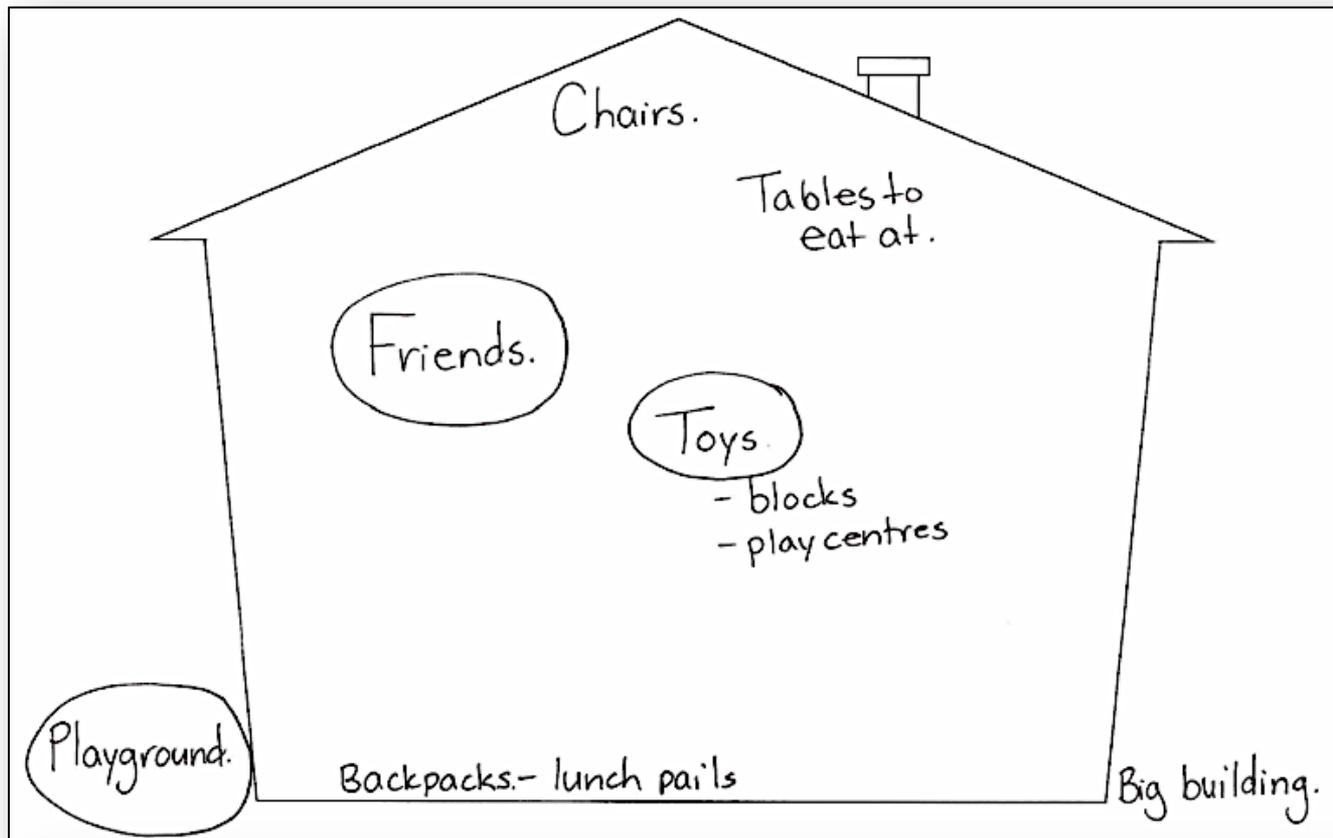


**Heidi**



**Esther**

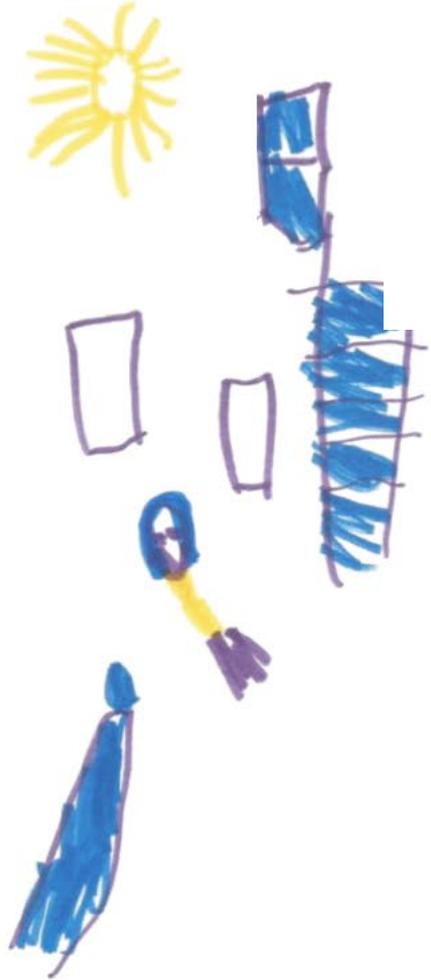
## "Building-a-Kindergarten" task



# Findings

- Thriving is a **complex** and **multi-dimensional** construct
- Supporting student thriving in the Kindergarten classroom requires a multi-faceted, integrated, and child-centred approach
- Overarching belief from adults that **all children can thrive when provided with appropriate supports**





- While the language used to convey ideas differed, numerous commonalities and consistencies were observed across the three perspectives



Comprehensive framework

## You can help me thrive by:

### Identifying and supporting basic and individual student needs

... by identifying and accessing supports and resources to help you best respond to student needs.

... by encouraging and supporting parent advocacy.

### Embracing a play-based, child-centred Kindergarten program

... that embraces play and play-based learning as central tenets.

... that supports the whole child, is developmentally appropriate, and gives children ownership and a voice.

### Cultivating a supportive and responsive learning environment

... that is co-created and reflects the needs and interests of students.

... that is safe, welcoming, and engaging, and is supported by caring and responsive educators.

... where children are supported to understand expectations and routines.

### Fostering a positive and supportive social environment

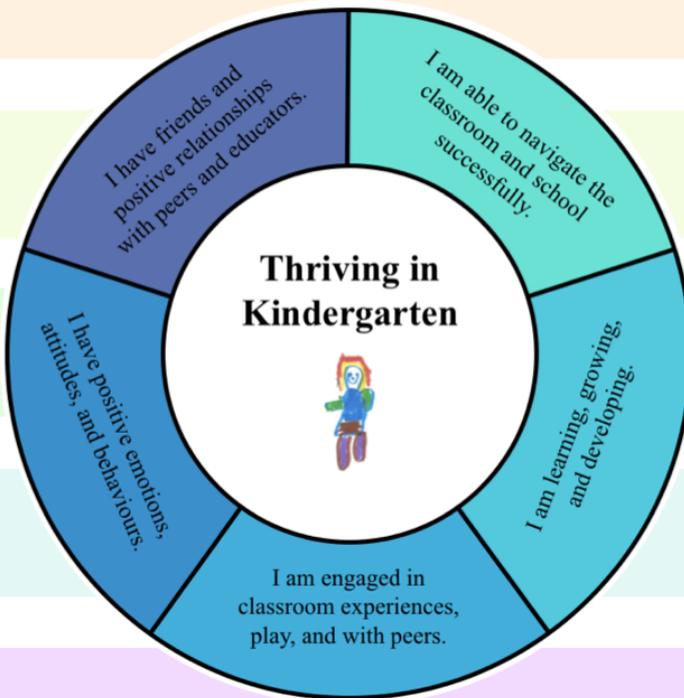
... including positive: friendships and peer relationships; student-educator relationships; home-school relationships built on respect; educator team relationship and work dynamic; and community relationships beyond school.

### Connecting with family, home, and community

... through opportunities to share home at school and to celebrate important life events.

... by connecting with the wider community.

## I am thriving when:



## I can thrive when:

I am recognized as both an **individual** and a **member of the classroom community**.

There are **special places and items in the classroom and at school that are connected to me** and show me that I belong.

I am able to **play** (indoors and outdoors).

I have access to various resources and spaces so I can engage in **diverse playful experiences**.

I am able to **play, read, be read to, and engage in the "work" of school** (providing it is in line with my existing abilities).

I am **supported** in learning how to **navigate the environment successfully**.

I have **friends** and I am a **friend to others**.

I am able to **play with my friends**.

I am supported by **caring educators** who help me and keep me safe.

I am able to **maintain a connection with my family and home** because they are part of who I am.

# Characteristics of a Thriving Student

- Has friends and **positive relationships** with peers and educators
- Able to **navigate** the classroom and school successfully
- Learning, **growing**, and developing
- **Engaged**
  - in classroom experiences
  - in play
  - with peers
- Positive **emotions, attitudes, and behaviours**



# How can we support student thriving?

**Individual  
Needs**

**Kindergarten  
Program**

**Learning  
Environment**

**Social  
Environment**

**Connections  
Beyond  
School**

# Individual Needs

- Identifying and supporting **basic** and **individual student needs**
- Identifying and **accessing supports and resources** to respond to student needs
- Encouraging and support **parent advocacy**
  
- Recognizing children as both an **individual** and as a **member of the classroom community**
- Providing children with special **places** and **items** that make them feel like they belong

# Kindergarten Program

- Embraces **play** and **play-based learning** as central tenets
- Supports the **whole child** and is **developmentally appropriate**
- Gives children **ownership** and a **voice** in the classroom
- Access to diverse **playful experiences** (indoors and outdoors)
  
- *The students said loud and clear:*

**“I need to play!”**

Researcher Look at all these faces. What is the same about them?

Niall It looks kind of like a smile. That looks like a smile.

Researcher Do all these friends look sad or do all these friends look happy?

Niall Happy. I look happy!

Researcher What do you think makes your friends happy at school?

Niall They **play** with me.



**Play** ← → **Positive Experiences/Emotions**

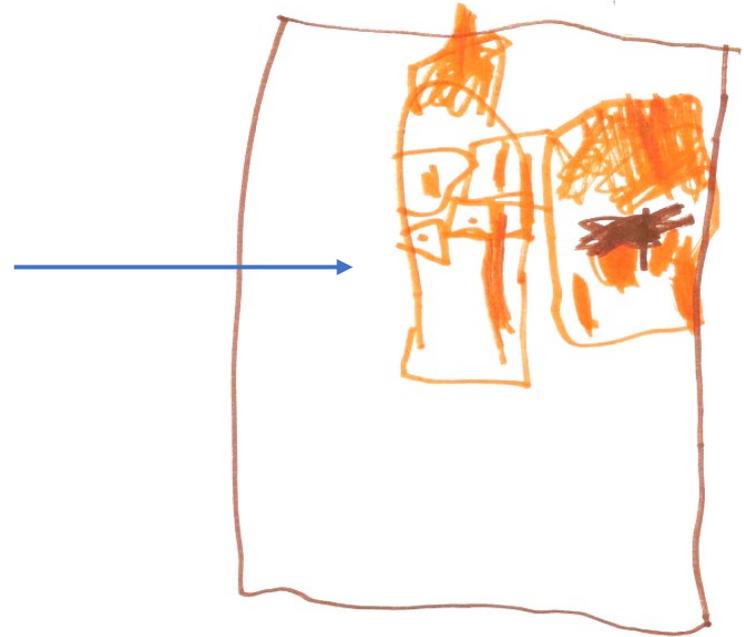
# Learning Environment

- Cultivate a **supportive** and **responsive** learning environment
- **Safe, welcoming, and engaging**
- **Co-created** and reflective of the needs of students
- Supported by **caring and responsive educators**
- **Support children** in understanding expectations and routines

- **Play, read, be read to, and engage in the “work” of school** (providing it is in line with existing abilities)

## Alexander

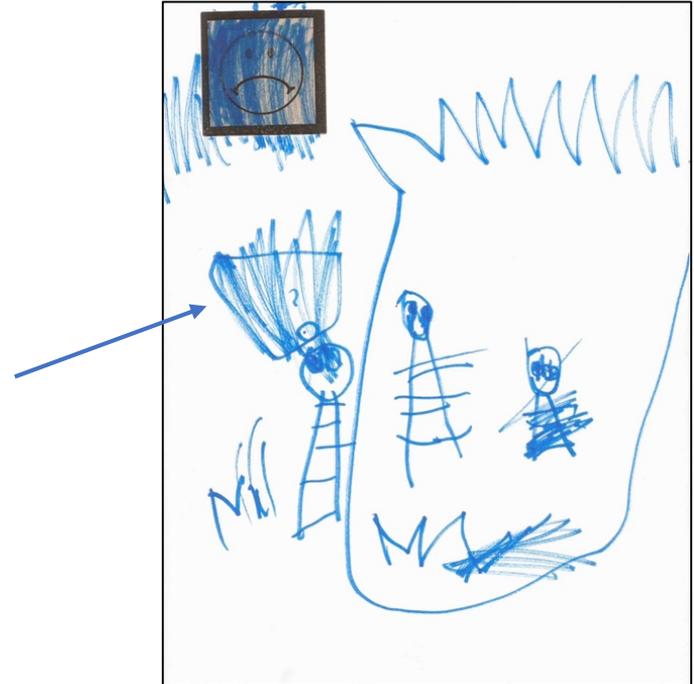
- Drew a picture of himself working “at the desk with Ms. Teacher”



- However, Niall highlighted that for this work to be positive, it needs to be at an appropriate level of challenge

## Niall

- Illustrated that “doing really hard work, like drawing letters” was viewed as a negative aspect of school for him



# Social Environment

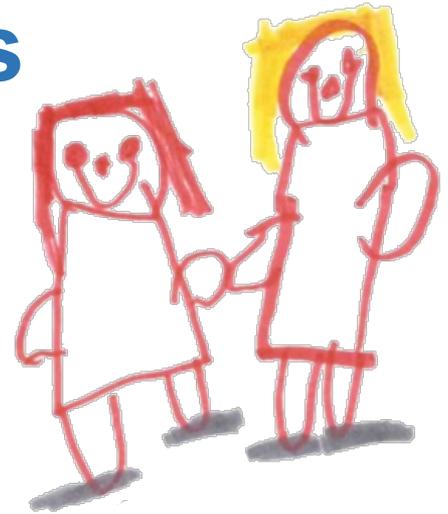
- **Positive and supportive relationships**
  - Friendships and **peer** relationships
  - **Student-educator** relationships
  - **Home-school** relationships built on respect
  - Educator **team** relationships and work dynamic
  - **Community** relationships

- From the students' perspective, friends are critical

## Having friends

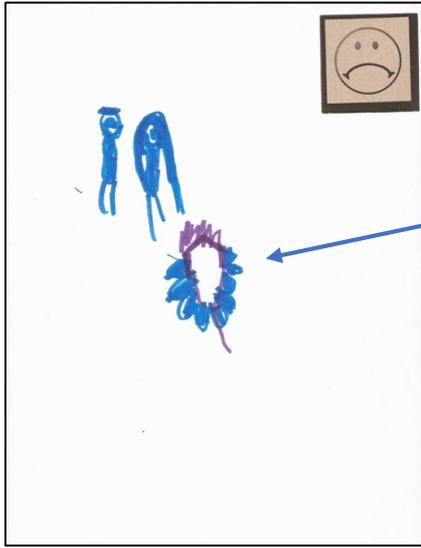
## Playing with friends

## Being a friend



# Connections Beyond School

- Opportunities to **share home at school** and to **celebrate important life events**
- Connecting with the **wider community**
- **Maintaining a connection** with family and home



## Amber

A negative aspect of school was leaving family and “being away from home”

## Heidi

Being able to independently ride the bus home from school was viewed as a positive aspect of school



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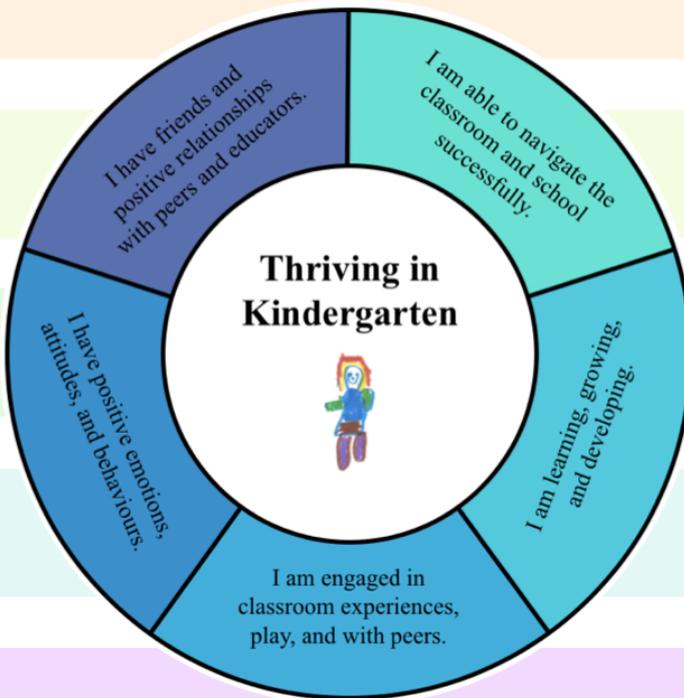
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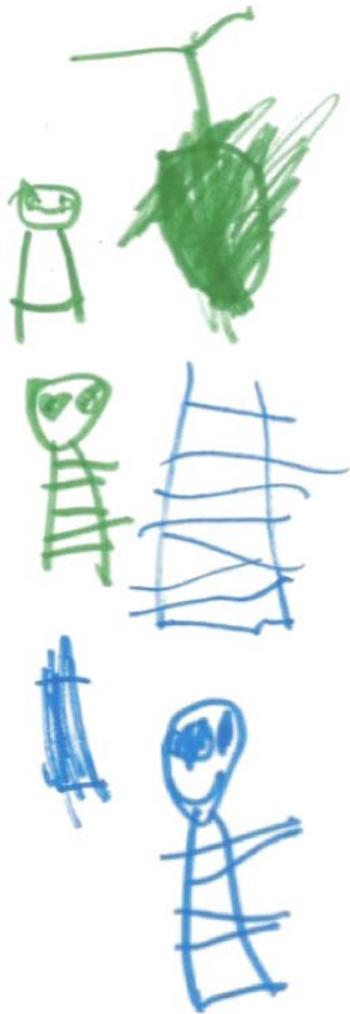
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# Listen. Learn. Act.

- These findings provide the foundation for further research, conversation, and exploration of what it means for children to thrive and how we can support them
- Grand Chief Doug Kelly
  - You can make a difference in a child's life
  - "be humble, be prepared to listen"

# Call to *Listen, Learn, and Act*

- Take the time to ask children what they need to thrive?
- Be prepared to “**listen**” and to **learn** from what they have to say
- Value their perspectives and **act**



# *Thank You!*

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