

CANADA'S LEGACY OF INACTION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

Martha Friendly

Early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) is on a range of Canadian social policy agendas from anti-poverty to human rights. There is good agreement among these sectors about the desirability of blending care and early education; accessibility for all children; substantial public funding accompanied by clear public policy; complementary parental leave; and choices within a system for parents. While there is an international trend toward such systems, Canada has seen little substantive change to reflect contemporary evidence about effective ECEC practices. Canadian ECEC policy-making is not based on the best available knowledge, leaving an extensive gap between what we know and what we do.

L'éducation des jeunes enfants et les services de garde sont à l'ordre du jour au Canada dans plusieurs domaines de politiques publiques allant de la lutte contre la pauvreté à la défense des droits de la personne. Il existe un consensus assez large en ce qui concerne l'opportunité d'associer garde et éducation des tout-petits ; d'assurer l'accessibilité, pour tous les enfants, à ces services ; d'offrir un financement public important accompagné de politiques claires ; et d'offrir des congés parentaux complémentaires. Si, dans le monde, on observe une tendance nette en faveur de l'instauration de tels régimes, au Canada, par contre, les changements qui permettraient au pays d'adopter des politiques reflétant les meilleures pratiques sont peu nombreux. Les politiques canadiennes dans ce domaine ne sont aucunement fondées sur les connaissances actuelles ; il existe un écart énorme entre ce que nous savons et ce que nous faisons.



During the past two years, the cancellation of Canada's embryonic national early childhood education and child care (ECEC) program has had the effect of reigniting a long-standing public and political debate about child care. In the wake of their 2006 electoral victory, the Conservatives promptly annulled the Martin government's commitment to collaborate with provinces and territories to begin the process of developing a national early learning and child care system. This has generated new interest in such public policy questions as: Why does Canada not have a child care system? Why do families in other countries have early education and child care while we don't? Without access to reliable child care, how can Canada support families, and mothers as working women? What does the absence of an adequate child care system mean for Canada's labour force and population growth? How do we see child care — is it an early childhood education program designed so that young children have the benefit of an enriching environment that also supports families' participation in the labour

force? Or is it a necessary but not particularly desirable place to keep children safe while mothers are at work? Should ECEC be seen as a public good, an individual responsibility or a commodity to be traded on stock markets by multinational corporations? Should ECEC programs be designed as targeted to low-income or working-poor families presuming that they "need it most" or as a universal program for all Canadians?

Today early childhood education and child care is part of many social agendas — anti-poverty, labour force, economic prosperity, women's equality, social justice and health promotion. While many details of a future Canadian ECEC system have yet to be worked out, a range of actors representing a variety of social and economic agendas concur not only that such a system is necessary but also about many of the key features of such a system. These include a blended approach to "care" and early education that accommodates parents' and children's interests; accessibility for all children; responsibility for substantial funding and clear

policy on the part of governments; complementary family support programs such as maternity/parental leave and child benefits; and a choice of ECEC options for parents within a coherent system.

The recommendations generated by the 2008 research-to-policy conference on improving conditions for the working poor held at McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy are a good reflection of the current consensus about moving forward on ECEC. The conference made these recommendations:

- There should be a Canada-wide public policy approach on ECEC and after-school programs that complements other social policies. ECEC policy should include clear policy goals and rationales, and a multiyear plan with targets, timetables and required investments for building and sustaining a supply of high-quality programs over time.
- Policy developments should be based on the best available evidence on such issues as financing, human resources and for-profit status and be accompanied by appropriate research and data collection that supports planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- Policies should be developed to ensure that programs are of sustained high quality, accessible to all Canadians and responsive to the needs of diverse communities.

In the past few decades, two developments have been the main drivers for establishment of an ECEC system. The first is the presence of mothers of young children in the labour force. Today it has become the norm for mothers to work outside the home even when their children are infants and toddlers; 69 percent of women with a youngest child of three years or less and 76 percent of women with a child aged three to five years were in the labour force in 2005,

up from 61 percent and 68 percent, respectively, 10 years earlier. This development has been a major driver for interest in child care by groups like the participants at the McGill conference; women who fall into the "working poor" category are by definition in the labour force and need access to reliable child care. But middle-class mothers as well as affluent physicians, lawyers and executives in the private sector are in the labour force and require child care too. So do students at all levels, women in training programs trying to move out of poverty and newcomers to Canada in all income and occupation categories. At the same time, birth rates in Canada as in many other countries have fallen, and concerns about aging populations mean that the participation of women in the paid labour force is now seen as integral to labour strategies. Cross-national research such as that of US economist Kevin Daly reinforces the argument that access to child care increases the likelihood that women will both participate in the labour force and continue to have babies.

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Child development research overwhelmingly supports this conception, although the importance of the quality of ECEC programs for child development cannot be overstated. Public opinion polls, as well as the fact that when early childhood education programs — nursery schools, kinder-

gartens or child care centres — are available and affordable, parents in all regions of Canada eagerly enrol young children from two or three years of age, indicate good public support for ECEC. It should be noted that child development as a driver featured in the McGill conference's ECEC recommendations, which identified not only accessibility to support low-income mothers in the workforce but quality as fundamental to the proposed system as well.

Yet while many other countries have managed to do so reasonably over the last 20 years, Canada has made little progress toward an ECEC system designed to meet these twin motivators. In the last few decades, Canadian kindergarten programs have expanded, more child care spaces have come on stream, provinces and local nongovernmental groups have undertaken pilot projects, development and quality improvement initiatives, and public spending has crept up to some extent.

But Canada has seen little real substantive or transformational change to reflect the considerable knowledge that has accumulated, not only about the effects of early childhood education and care but about the policy choices that make these programs

work in the best interests of children and to support families and communities. This is so even in Quebec, which in the late 1990s became Canada's ECEC leader by striking out on its own to develop an ECEC system more advanced than any in Canada.

Yet the data show that with a change in government and shifting political agendas even Quebec's progress toward full access and high

quality has flagged in recent years. At the same time, other provinces have failed to follow Quebec's lead by making transformational change in their own ECEC situations. Overall, when we compare what we know about ECEC and what we do in Canada, it is clear that although much good evidence is available,

one of the most consistent findings in developmental science."

Exemplified by the reports of Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard, the benefits of ECEC programs have most recently been associated in Canada with an emphasis on human development as interpreted in conceptions about prosperity in modern soci-

defined curriculum framework. In addition, multiple studies identify auspice — whether a program is operated for profit or not for profit — as a key quality-related characteristic. These studies have found that programs operated as profit-making businesses are significantly less likely to produce high quality than not-for-profits.

Economists such as Nobel Prize winner James Heckman are often cited to support arguments that universal early childhood education must be part of the human capital strategies considered critical for modern competitive countries. In this conception, the quality of an ECEC program is judged by the extent to which it has the right characteristics for producing children who are "school ready."

ECEC policy-making in 21st century Canada is not based on the "best available knowledge."

Over the past few decades, extensive evidence about the effects of ECEC on children, families, communities and the economy and about how characteristics of ECEC policy and programs are associated with these effects has accumulated from two main kinds of sources. The first knowledge source is a large body of empirical studies, many in the area of child development. These come mainly from the United States with a small but robust body of Canadian research in several disciplines and some studies from other countries.

One key policy-related conclusion that has been drawn from this literature is that it is the quality of early childhood programs, not participation in them per se, that has an impact on children's development; some evidence suggests that poor-quality ECEC programs may have deleterious effects, especially for children from poorly resourced homes. Indeed, psychologists Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips note in an American Academies of Science research summary that "the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is

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While there are arguably other valid ways of conceptualizing the benefits of ECEC programs for children, the research discussed here primarily reflects benefits based on measures of cognitive, language and social development.

A robust collection of empirical studies go on to identify characteristics of child care programs and policy that are predictive of or associated with better child outcomes or higher program scores using standard measures of ECEC quality linked in research to child outcomes. These include teaching staff and directors with post-secondary training in early childhood education; higher staff salaries; a favourable staff-child ratio; a positive centre organizational climate. A smaller selection of studies show the value of program characteristics such as reflective practice, good physical environment and a planned approach using a

A second important policy-related conclusion drawn from research is associated with accessibility. A 2008 literature review by Gillian Doherty concludes that accessibility to high-quality ECEC programs benefits all children,

not merely those who are poor or at-risk. Doherty, reviewing the evidence on universal approaches compared to targeting services to the vulnerable, asserts that "while the initial costs [of universal ECEC] are higher than those for targeted programs, a universal approach is an attractive alternative." She summarizes the evidence on two points: first, universal programs reach a higher proportion of vulnerable children than targeted programs. Second — perhaps even more significant — child development research shows that high-quality ECEC programs benefit children from all income groups, not just those who are poor, although children from low-resourced homes may benefit most.

Policy research is the second important source of evidence about best practices in ECEC. Policy research — often comparative — has accumulated as many countries have put workable ECEC systems in place or begun contributing significant public funds. International and comparative studies have identified "best" practices, for example, those described in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 20-nation study (1998-2006). Using the detailed country analyses, the OECD concluded that eight "policy lessons" were associated with accessi-



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Daycare kids on a trip to a market in Montreal. Quebec, notes Martha Friendly, has taken the lead in early child care education programs.

ble, high-quality ECEC systems: (1) a systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation; (2) a strong and equal partnership with the education system; (3) a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support; 4) substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure; 5) a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance; 6) appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision; 7) systematic attention to monitoring and data collection; and 8) a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and

evaluation. The study concluded that “countries that have adopted some or all of these elements of successful policy share a strong public commitment to young children and their families.”

Some policy studies also identify “worst” policy practices. An example of this is found in Australian political scientist Deborah Brennan’s work documenting the results of the corporatization of Australian child care. Her analysis describes how generous “demand-side” subsidies fuelled the boom-and-bust growth of a publicly traded corporate child care monopoly but did little to make child care high

quality, equitable or affordable, illustrating the OECD’s 2006 conclusion that “evidence suggests that direct public funding of services brings more effective governmental steering of early childhood services, advantages of scale, better national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access compared with parent subsidy models.” Another example of analysis of “worst practices” comes from psychiatrist Michael Rutter’s 2008 analysis of the poor results of the British Sure Start program as preventative intervention; he suggests that, among other policy features, the absence of clear policy and implementa-

tion plans is implicated in Sure Start's poor results: "If it is to work...there must be clarity and explicitness on what is to be integrated. The problem for Government is that there is no 'it' that comprises Sure Start."

The two sources of knowledge about ECEC discussed here — empirical research and policy studies — are not mutually exclusive but often reinforce one another. Today it would be accurate to say that there is extensive evidence upon which Canada could draw to use the "best available knowledge" about best policy and program practices to develop ECEC models that work for Canadians.

In the review of Canada published in 2004 that was part of its comparative study, the OECD commented that "national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages." The OECD team's comments on Canada's early childhood situation included the following observations:

- Other than in Quebec, there has been no significant expansion of the system in Canada over the past decade.
- There are long waiting lists in community services, including in centres catering to children with special needs.
- There is a market-determined fee structure (except in Manitoba and Quebec), resulting in high parental contributions to child care costs.
- The subsidy system, with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria, is inefficient, and is accessed by only 22 percent of lone parents and around 5 percent of married mothers from low-income families.
- Public expenditure rates per child in child care are low.
- There is generalized underfunding in the child care sector with respect to wages, learning environments and infrastructure, both

physical (premises, outdoor spaces) and non-physical (the infrastructure of planning, administration, training, monitoring, evaluation, data collection).

- There has been a general stagnation in quality across the board.

Canada's limited, badly directed public funding and weak public policy have had two key results for ECEC. First, although research shows ECEC quality to be of key importance for children's development, quality in Canadian child care is too often mediocre at best. Second, reliance on user fees and ineffective fee subsidy systems as well as scarce or nonexistent capital funding and limited planning have acted as barriers, making fees unaffordable and the supply of programs far from adequate.

As the OECD research describes, public investment in ECEC systems has become the norm in many countries, which have set up publicly funded systems blending education and care reasonably well and making them available to most children from two or three years of age. Canada, however, has done little to modernize its approaches to ECEC or to develop a systematic approach. The two key ECEC policy issues of quali-

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ty and access, and the policy tools that affect them — financing, regulation and human resources — have generally stagnated in Canada as priorities, ideologies and policy approaches have shifted repeatedly at the provincial and federal levels. For the most part, key policy-linked features of ECEC programs including

educational requirements for early childhood educators, how educators are paid and treated, financing methods, system and program development and approaches to quality have remained relatively static, little touched by the knowledge that has been accumulating for more than two decades.

To be accessible to a family, a place in an ECEC program must be available at an affordable price (or have no fee), and the program must be suitable vis-à-vis age, language, schedule and ability/disability. Between 1992 and 2006, coverage (number of children divided by spaces) in regulated child care increased only about 10 percent, from 7.5 to 17.2 percent for children aged 0-12 years. The most recent data show that between 2006 and 2007, expansion in child care supply fell to the lowest level in some years. This slow down includes Quebec; while Quebec's expansion had accounted for half Canada's child care growth in the early 2000s, its growth has now slowed dramatically. At the same time, coverage is extremely variable across Canada: Quebec provides spaces for 34.8 percent of children aged 0-12, while Saskatchewan covers only 5.9 percent.

Cross-Canada data on affordability (fees) have not been available since 1998. Two provinces, Quebec and Manitoba, set maximum fees (\$7/day in Quebec, \$376/month for two- to five-year-olds in Manitoba). Elsewhere, parents pay close to the full cost for child care, unless they are among the minority of low-income

families — estimated by the OECD to be only 22 percent of lone-parent families — lucky enough to get a fee subsidy.

It should be noted that access to kindergarten — an ECEC program usually quite separate from regulated

issue with a new multinational and chain child care sector growing in some provinces. And although research recently reviewed by the Australian Gary Moore shows that quality in early childhood education is partly related to the quality of the

care act and more than two decades since the 1986 Task Force on Child Care filled a 400-page report with rationales and recommendations for setting up such a system. There have been federal, provincial and local government reports, task forces and commissions on the need for child care and the value of early childhood education. Conceptions about working mothers and early childhood education have shifted, a solid majority of Canadian mothers are in the paid labour force, and child poverty has remained stubbornly high.

Four federal governments — Trudeau's, Mulroney's, Chrétien's and Martin's — have put ECEC on their political agendas and taken at least the preliminary steps to a national approach. A Canada-wide advocacy movement has continued to press for a universally accessible, high quality, publicly funded, not-for-profit system. There have been shifts, advances and retreats in ECEC policy. But four decades after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, Canada still has no coherent approach to early childhood education and care.

child care in Canada — is universal and free, but in most provinces it is available only for five-year-olds. In addition, as kindergarten is only part-time (2.5 hours/day in most provinces), it doesn't accommodate working parents' schedules.

Quality is ECEC's second main policy issue and, as noted earlier, key in determining child outcomes. In the most recent Canada-wide study of quality in 1998, regulated child care programs were predominantly rated as mediocre to poor using standard observational measures and key indicators of quality (training in early childhood education, wages, working conditions and benefits, management style, in-service training and staff morale). Two Quebec studies show similar results.

More recent data on quality that are comparable across jurisdictions or over time are unavailable. Current information on some indicators of quality is available but not encouraging. Early childhood education training requirements and child care wages are low. Auspices — linked in empirical studies to staff training; wages; working conditions; staff turnover and education, administrative environment; compliance with minimum standards of health, hygiene and safety — continue to be a contentious

physical environment, the OECD's review of Canada noted that physical environments for Canadian child care are often makeshift and poorly designed, materials and equipment are "of doubtful learning quality," and the quality and availability of outdoor environments are frequently poor.

Public financing has a significant impact on ECEC quality through staff wages, retention, working conditions, physical facilities and equipment. When calculated per space, public financing in Canadian child care is extremely low (mean spending per regulated space was \$3,259 in 2006, an increase of \$36 over 2004 and only \$74 since 2001) compared to public education or financing in countries with high-quality ECEC programs. Over time, Canadian ECEC financing outside Quebec has increased very little. Indeed, the 2006 final report of the OECD's study showed Canada's public spending for ECEC programs (including regulated child care and kindergarten) to be the lowest among the 14 countries included; Canada as a whole spent only 0.25 percent of GDP compared to more than 1.5 percent of GDP for the highest spenders.

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Comparing the current state of Canadian ECEC with best policy practices reveals a vast gap between what we know and what we do. Much good evidence is readily available but ECEC policy-making in 21st century Canada continues not to be based on the best available knowledge, leaving an extensive evidence gap. This is neither good public policy-making nor in the best interests of Canadians.

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