

"How can we become Sweden?": Fundamental questions about Canadian child care ^[1]

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Some years ago, a student in my ECEC policy course at Ryerson University asked an emblematic question: "How can we become Sweden?" Sorry to say for many of us who have long advocated for universal, high quality childcare-- the short answer is "we can't". However, a longer answer that draws on international policy research sheds some light on two fundamental questions that are well worth considering: "Why we do what we do?" and "How can we do better?"

Why we do what we do?

Until about fifteen years ago, there was little information comparing Canadian childcare with that in other countries. Canadians were complacent about our approach to childcare policy: it was, at least better, than the USA's. It wasn't until the OECD reviewed Canadian ECEC as part of a 20-nation study (2001-2006) and UNICEF's 25 nation report card (2008) showed Canada to be at the bottom that it became apparent that Canada is one of the worst of the world's ECEC laggards.

Today international analysis tells us about more than Canada's ECEC laggard status. Not only do we know that Canada – a rich country – doesn't support women, families or children very well but we have some ideas about "why we do what we do".

UNICEF's 2008 country rankings in The Child Care Transition showed how the 25 nations measured up on 10 key benchmarks of ECEC quality and access. Close to the bottom – three or fewer checkmarks – were most of what are termed "liberal democratic" countries (USA, Ireland, Australia, Canada). At the top – receiving eight to ten checkmarks were the "social democratic states" (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Iceland). Only Sweden met all ten benchmarks designed to assess such things as staff: child ratios, ECE training, accessibility, provision of public funding, etc. in childcare and kindergarten. Canada, tied with Ireland, was at the very bottom, meeting only one benchmark. This picture illustrates that political ideas are critical in shaping social programs and help explain why ECEC in Canada is the way it is.

Danish sociologist Gösta Esbing-Andersen described three types of countries Three worlds of welfare capitalism (1990), a key writing about differences in how advanced capitalist states (developed countries) provide social welfare programs. Canada's privatized childcare, with its stingy public funding and limited government role, fits neatly into the "liberal democratic" category while the Nordic countries make up the social democratic cluster.

Countries like Canada are described as emphasizing "the privacy of the family and the primacy of the market"; liberal democratic welfare regimes are characterized by low provision of social services and low-income eligibility testing rather than the universal entitlements for a broad citizenry used by the social-democratic (and other) countries. Heavy reliance on parent fees, targeted, not universal services, fragmentation of care and education, and enthusiasm for unregulated and for-profit childcare are all liberal-democratic hallmarks. And – as the UNICEF and OECD studies and other research and analysis show – this means ECEC provision that offers poor access and too-often poor or mediocre quality.

There is a second key political characteristic that also helps explain why Canada's childcare is the way it is – one that helps us understand why federal governments have often tended to stay away from ECEC, and why ECEC is such a hodge-podge of access and quality across Canada; Canada is a federation (like the USA, Australia, Switzerland, Germany), not a unitary state like Sweden (France, Denmark, Britain). This means that in Canada, power and authority are divided between the federal government and the provinces/territories. Federations vary from each other in various ways such as how centralized or decentralized they are; Canada is considered to be quite decentralized among federations, meaning that provinces have considerable responsibility.

These characteristics go back to Canada's beginnings. When Canada was established in 1867, some powers – taxation, defense, criminal code – became a federal responsibility while education, health and social programs, especially services, became provincial responsibilities. Still, the federal government took leadership on health care beginning in the 1960s but provinces have been free to establish – or fail to establish – childcare as they chose. And provinces/territories have established high quality, widely accessible, well-integrated childcare systems on their own.

Thus, political ideas and structures are translated into policies that – at a practical level – ultimately determine whether parents can afford the fees, what kinds of wages and recognition early childhood educators have, what kinds of buildings childcare programs are in, who maintains and cleans them, who owns them – basically, how ECEC is provided "on the ground" for families, children and to support women's equality.

How can we do better?

Historical arrangements and governance structures certainly shape social programs but are certainly not completely definitive. Witness Medicare, Canada's most cherished social program across Canada, albeit within provincial jurisdiction. International research today provides valuable practical information about how we can do ECEC much better: what kinds of principles, policies and implementation plans work best to ensure equitable access for families and to support children's development and well-being with high quality programs.

The international evidence shows that:

- A system, not a market, is the basis for accessible, high quality ECEC programs;
- The most effective ECEC systems are well planned at all levels, with targets and timetables, using the best available knowledge, by knowledgeable policy makers;
- Effective ECEC systems seamlessly blend "care" and "early childhood education" in a strong and equal partnership;
- Universality works better for all than targeting or rationing access to ECEC programs;
- ECEC systems work best when they begin with clear values, goals and objectives and a clear approach to pedagogy;
- High quality systems have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for governments and parents, strong public management and are public or not-for-profit, not businesses;
- Infrastructure is important, with one government department – preferably education – taking the lead. Infrastructure should include legislation, standards and ongoing quality improvement.
- Both how much public funding is available and how it's spent, are key. High quality accessible ECEC systems need substantial publicly financing – at least 1% of GDP;
- Base funding to programs to cover operating costs – not relying on fee subsidies or vouchers – work best. Parent fees (where there are fees) should be affordable;
- It is absolutely clear that well-educated early childhood educators are key to quality, and that good wages and working conditions, and respect for the work are key to ensuring a high quality childcare workforce;
- The physical environment is important – some call it the "third teacher". There should be well-designed indoor and outdoor space, good program resources and amenities such as staff rooms, kitchens, and natural light;
- In a high quality system, program quality improvement is ongoing, an integral part of the system;
- Strong ECEC systems are informed by data, research, evaluation and regular review of goals and objectives;
- Finally, high quality ECEC systems work best for children and families if they are complemented by other family policies including flexible well-supported family leave and labour policy ensuring adequate family income and time.

Thus today the problem is not so much not about knowing what or how Canada can do better. There is excellent knowledge about what policies and practices work to support women's equality, parents, children, the community and society. The problem is getting stubborn governments – federal and provincial/territorial – to muster the political will to "do right thing" financially with the best possible policy framework. In short, Canada's problem can be summed up as "not enough money, not enough policy". It is noteworthy that other countries (Germany and Slovenia, for example) have changed long-standing historical approaches to ideology-embedded social practices regarding families so as to make significant changes to childcare.

Today most young children in Canada have working mothers while the historic male breadwinner model hasn't been the reality for most families for almost 40 years. If young women are to have children, universal childcare must be available to underpin their economic security as well as playing a key role in strengthening 21st century productivity. Finally, as many Canadians have come to understand the educational value of good quality childcare programs, these have come to be regarded as a necessary part of the social infrastructure, not a luxury.

We often hear that quality childcare makes good economic sense, and the research supports this. But universal childcare also makes sense because it is the right thing to do – a human right and a child's right. This means that if Canada is to be a 21st century country that does the right thing, we need a new approach to ECEC based on the best available up-to-date international evidence rather than relying on 19th century approaches that do not work.

This, while it may not be possible for Canada to become Sweden, there is considerable scope for applying what we know about childcare so as to become a better Canada.

Note that an earlier version of this was published in Bridges (Manitoba Child Care Association in 2011).

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