

Inequalities in access to early childhood education and care in Canada^[1]

The equal access study

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EXCERPTS from the Introduction

Over the last five years, a new focus on linking early childhood education and care (ECEC) to inequality has emerged among ECEC researchers and policy analysts, particularly in Europe. This has generally been shaped by two main kinds of questions. The first kind of question is about whether ECEC is indeed “the greatest of all equalizers” between advantaged and disadvantaged children, as is often claimed (for example, Bokova 2010; Heckman 2011). Or should this link be conceptualised in a more nuanced, rights-based way, notwithstanding the importance of high-quality ECEC for strengthening equality of opportunity for children, families and women, as argued by Morabito, Vandenbroeck and Roose (2013). Connected to these questions are concerns such as Penn’s about how the oversimplification of ideas about ECEC as an equaliser may obscure fundamental issues such as income inequality and poverty (2017).

A second question – linked to the first – is somewhat more straightforward. It is concerned with equal (or unequal) access to high-quality ECEC. That is, if access is unequal, as the available data suggests it often is, who is left out, and why? (See, for example, Thévenon et al. 2016). Just as important are questions about what features of ECEC policy and provision are likely to make access – particularly access to high-quality ECEC programmes – more or less equal. That is, if equitable access to ECEC services is a goal, what kinds of structures and actions are most likely to achieve it? (Van Lancker 2017; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016a).

This paper on ECEC in Canada – part of a comparative project by the International Centre Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) at the German Youth Institute (DJI) – seeks to address questions about inequality in access to early childhood education and care through the prism of Canada. Canada is, in a sense, a curious choice as a prism to examine this question, as it is often called a family policy “laggard” (Mahon 2009). In addition to the regionalised nature of its ECEC policy and provision, Canada stands out as a wealthy country in which only a minority of young children have access to ECEC until the year prior to formal schooling which begins at age six. An OECD report examining family policy provision in 28 countries identified Canada as an outlier even in its cluster defined as “Anglo-Saxon countries: support for poor families, single parents, and households with preschool children” (Thévenon 2011, p.69) with low child care coverage, very low public spending for child care (thus high parent costs as a percentage of income, especially for single-parent families) (Thévenon 2011, Figure 3 and Table A2).

Related link:

Region: Canada^[3]

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