

Imagining a caring early childhood education and care system in Canada: a thought experiment ^[1]

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Excerpted from the introduction

Canada is frequently described as a laggard when it comes to its early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. In its assessments of ECEC services in advanced industrial countries, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2008) ranked Canada last, alongside Ireland. The low expectations that politicians and policymakers have for the out-of-home care of very young children is a variable that undergirds this low ranking. From a policy design perspective, it is often considered sufficient if children are merely safe and protected in ECEC settings. This low expectation, relatively consistent since the 1970s, informs minimal requirements and government investment in Canadian ECEC services. Nevertheless, at times over the last two decades, some politicians, policymakers and advocates at the national and sub-national (provincial/territorial/indigenous/ municipal) levels have collaborated to envision a transformed system of ECEC.

Canada is a federation, so provincial and territorial governments, which are responsible for ECEC and education services, must work with – and are often partially financially dependent upon – the federal government's leadership in national policy and social service planning. In 2005, the federal Liberal government negotiated bilateral agreements with provinces and territories to launch a national early learning and childcare system in Canada. These agreements were cancelled when a Conservative government was elected in 2006. After ten years of an ECEC policy drought, the current federal Liberal government recently renewed the bilateral agreements but focused narrowly on funding targeted childcare services for specific populations.

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