

The Quebec child care system: Lessons from research^[1]

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Source: Recent Perspective on Early Childhood Education in Canada

Format: Book / booklet

Publication Date: 1 Dec 2012

AVAILABILITY

Access online via paid subscription^[2]

Excerpts from chapter

In most industrialized countries there has been a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood and the need to support children and their families through the provision of learning environments for all young children. Canada, however, lags behind many of its counterparts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with regard to early childhood development programs. In fact, a recent evaluation and comparison of early childhood services in twenty-five OECD countries placed Canada second to last because it met only one of the ten important benchmarks for early childhood education and care (ECEC) – a set of minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years (UNICEF, 2008).

In Canada, education and child care fall primarily under provincial jurisdiction, and the federal government's role is limited largely to the transfer of funds to provincial and territorial governments for early childhood programs and services. Given significant disparities between the provinces and the need for a national child care agenda, the Government of Canada announced in 2004 that it would work with the provinces and territories to establish a national system of early learning and child care based on four key principles: quality, universality, accessibility, and developmental programming. These four principles are referred to by the acronym QUAD. The subsequent budget committed \$5 billion over five years to enhance and expand early learning and child care and also clarified the QUAD principals, defining them as follows:

- **Quality:** evidence-based, high-quality practices relating to programs for children, training, and support for early childhood educators (ECEs) and child care providers, and provincial/territorial regulation and monitoring
- **Universally inclusive:** open to all children without discrimination
- **Accessible:** available and affordable to those who choose to use it
- **Developmental:** focused on enhancing early childhood learning opportunities and the developmental component of early childhood education and care programs and services

"In 2005, the federal government began negotiations with nine provinces, but only Ontario and Manitoba entered into final funding agreements with the Government of Canada. Quebec did not sign an initial bilateral agreement-in-principle but negotiated, in October 2005, and signed a funding agreement to support its existing early learning and child care system. In January 2006, however, the new Conservative federal government gave one year's notice that it would cancel the bi-lateral child care agreements with the provinces and allocate funds directly to families for child care instead of favouring the development of a national child care agenda through direct funding of services.

Canada's initial goals were very similar to those already pursued by Quebec in its system of educational child care. Child care services in Quebec had, in fact, undergone a major transformation since 1997, when the government first adopted its new family policy. One of the linchpins of this innovative policy was the setting up of a network of fixed-fee services for all children aged 5 years and under, irrespective of family income. The network was intended to address the issue of work-family balance and to provide children, no matter what the financial status of their parents, with a pre-school environment fostering their social, emotional, and cognitive development and preparing them for entry into the school system (Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance, 1997). Previously, financial aid for child care had come through two sources: the refundable tax credit for child care expenses, and the Office des services de garde à l'enfance (child care services office), established in 1980 by the Government of Quebec, which issued operating and construction grants directly to non-profit day care centres and had a program for the provision of financial assistance with child care fees to eligible low-income families. The new policy called for the gradual implementation, beginning on 1 September 1997, of \$5-a-day per child for subsidized child care, with the government assuming the remaining cost. The day care spaces were initially made available to children who had reached the age of 4 years by 30 September of that year, but the plan called for increasing the number of spaces and gradually (year-by-year) lowering the age of admission. Existing fee-waiving and financial aid programs would also be gradually discontinued in step with the new plan.

Thus, in 1997, Quebec began to commit significant resources to the consolidation and development of its child care network. In July, the new Ministry of the Family and Children assumed the responsibilities of the former Secrétariat à la famille (family secretariat and office for child care services) and set out to build its network from existing services, namely, non-profit child care centres, regulated home-based child care, and for-profit centres. For-profit centres were given the option to convert their legal status and become non-profit or to

sign agreements with the government to offer reduced-contribution child care spaces. In fact, the government reached agreements with most of the licensed for-profit centres in operation in June 1997 to retain their for-profit status and to sign contracts to provide reduced-fee child care spaces. But the main thrust of the new child care policy was the development of early childhood centres (Centres de la petite enfance, CPEs) from the non-profit centres and the child care agencies that had formerly been responsible for home-based services. The CPEs, non-profit organizations whose boards of directors include parent users (who hold the majority of the seats along with two members of the personnel and one member representing the community), would oversee two branches of child care services: those offered in child care centres and those offered in home-based settings.

Quebec's change in policy represented a real commitment by the government to both early learning and child care programs. Quebec is, therefore, unique in Canada in the number of available regulated, fixed-fee, reduced-contribution child care spaces: in 2008, the number of regulated child care spaces in Quebec represented about 37 per cent of all regulated spaces in Canada (Beach et al., 2009). The province is also unique in its method of funding spaces: cash payments or refundable tax credits to families were largely replaced by a system of direct funding of services. In 2009, direct grants to child care services represented about 37 per cent of the provincial budget for families, or \$2.4 billion (Ministère des Finances, 2009). Making regulated child care spaces more affordable for the majority of families led to a significant increase in demand that, in turn, stimulated the rapid growth of the sector (see Table 10.1).

Region: Quebec [3]

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