

"You can't compare apples and pears": Setting the record straight on Quebec's child care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As the debate rages over proposals to improve U.S. child care, several commentators— mostly self-described conservatives—have pointed to Quebec's child care system as a cautionary tale. But how accurate is that interpretation? What has gone well and what has gone badly in Quebec, and what lessons are applicable to the States? To get a nuanced take, I spoke with Dr. Christa Japel. Dr. Japel is an associate professor at the Université de Québec à Montréal and a widely-recognized expert on early care and education quality. She has led studies of the Quebec system and written many papers on the topic. She also co-authored a recent piece for the Institute for Research on Public Policy, a neutral governmental think tank, entitled "What is 'the Quebec Model' of early learning and child care?"

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

1. Can you give a brief history of how Quebec's current child care system came to be?

At the end of 1990s, we had a Minister, Pauline Marois, who said we have to do something for child care, as a feminist gesture. At that point, the employment rate of women was much lower than the rest of Canada. So she had this idea: we are going to develop a universal child care system with very low parental fees. So they converted the existing community centers and some of the for-profit centers, and those became what are known as Centres de la Petite Enfance (CPEs) — early childhood centers. The goal was to have a space for all children up to 4 years by the year 2000, which was not realistic at all [the year before the reform, there was only space for 15% of young children].

The demand rose extremely, which also caused a rapid expansion of home-based care. The workforce was not there. Even now, 25 years later, we still don't have a publicly-funded, regulated space for every child. But the idea was great! Over time, though, the governments changed, the fees went up and the ban on private sector participation was lifted.

So over the last 10 years, we've seen a rapid growth in for-profit programs that signed an agreement with the Ministry and could offer these \$5- or \$7-a-day spaces and still maintain their for-profit status. Then the last government decided that 'we're going to open it up for for-profits that aren't publicly funded.' So parents pay full price, but get a tax refund at the end of the month. The for-profit sector has grown 1,000-fold since 2009; they have as many spaces as the CPEs now.

Our big issue is the quality. All the research we've done here, across Canada, and in other countries, shows that for-profits tend to be of lower quality. Why is that? Because they are for-profit! They have to make a profit. The CPEs are not-for-profits. They are run by a committee that includes parents. They're not perfect yet, but they're much better than the for-profits.

2. Particularly on the American Right, we often see negative research lifted up, particularly those papers by Baker, Gruber & Milliken. Specifically, these authors assert that participation in Quebec's child care system leads to negative child outcomes. How should we think about that research?

We should think about that research as being associated with a pretty conservative think tank. Methodologically, they are not solid at all. There's a difference between psychological and econometric research. The economists start with the idea, because universal child care was put into place in '97 and '98, that all children were exposed to the effect. That's not true! Only a minority of children was in child care when it all started.

And since we have longitudinal data, they try to find effects on vocabulary, behavior, and even the latest article on criminality. In my opinion, it's criminal to do this kind of analysis because they did not follow the same kids — they took different cohorts! Then they extrapolated from it. And a lot of people said, 'well, child care, we're raising criminals!' That's an absolutely false interpretation of those results. You can't compare apples and pears.

It feeds into a very right-wing philosophy: women stay at home, you take care of the kids, why should the state contribute to child care, it's your responsibility. So I'm very skeptical about that research.

3. Does that research take into account the differences in quality you've been describing?

No. It doesn't look at quality, just whether you've been in child care or not. You know, it's a huge sample. It's easy to get to an effect size of $p < 0.5$ or 0.05. But if you look at the score of child care vs. not in child care, it's a minimal difference. It's not at all at a clinical level. It's purely statistical acrobatics. But people take it at face value!

4. On the other hand, we often hear that Quebec's system pays for itself. Is that accurate?

I think it is. The economist Pierre Fortin has done analyses that showed it pretty much paid for itself, even bringing in a little bit more. Labor force participation of women with young children has gone up to over 80%, which is much higher than the rest of Canada with less affordable child care. That contribution to the economy brings in money for the state, and if you factor all that in, the money that the state spends on child care balances out.

5. How is the system funded?

It's a provincial responsibility — it's Quebec. Right now it's a really interesting time, because the federal government has decided we should work on a national child care agenda. So they are signing bilateral agreements, which means the provinces get money for child care. Although there aren't clear guidelines yet about what provinces have to do with it. For Quebec, we have to work on quality, it's the Achilles Heel of our system.

6. I'm curious about the workforce. What does an average Quebec child care teacher get paid?

Wages are low, like everywhere else. But they are higher here than elsewhere in Canada, with wage scales that go up to a bit more than \$20 [U.S.]/hour. But we always say, a zookeeper makes more money than a child care provider! It's a big problem. Retaining people isn't easy. It's better in CPEs — wages are better, they are unionized [and most have access to benefit packages]. But in the private programs, wages are lower and there is huge turnover.

7. What would you say are the main lessons the U.S. can and should learn from Quebec?

One is: early childhood education and care should not be a market. It should be subsidized. Invest in a system that provides affordable care for all parents. We must ensure we have qualified personnel and support people in their work, because it's very demanding. Low ratios are important!

Also, one-fee-for-all has benefited the middle class, but the working poor, \$8.25 a day is a lot! So we have to answer, how do we get the most vulnerable children & families into child care, since they benefit the most from it? It's not free for anyone (unless you have a social service intervention plan). It should be free for those up to a certain income.

Another lesson is that Quebec went too fast. You have to have a long-term plan — it's not enough to just open up spaces. They didn't focus on quality. You have to put in place a strategy that takes into account how many children live in an area, who are the neediest, how do we get them in and ensure our child care system is quality?

To sum it up: Go slow and go thoroughly.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

Tags: universal child care ^[4]

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