

Fundamental questions about early childhood education and care in Canada: Why do we do what we do? How can we do better?^[1]

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Why do we do what we do? How can we do better?

A useful way to think about these two questions is captured by a question once asked by a student in my ECEC policy course at Ryerson: "How can we become Sweden?" Unfortunately for many of us who have long advocated for universal, high quality childcare, the short answer is "we can't". However, a longer answer not only sheds some light on "why we do what we do" but also points to how we can do better.

Until about ten years ago, there was little information available that compared Canada's ECEC with ECEC in other countries. We Canadians were (of course) confident that our approach to childcare was better than the USA's -- at least. It wasn't until the OECD's 20 nation ECEC review (2001-2006) and UNICEF's 2008 25 nation report card that hard data became available showing Canada to be among the very worst -- perhaps the worst -- of the world's ECEC laggards.

What do we know about "why we do what we do"? And what do we know about "how we can do better"?

We know that Canada -- a rich country -- doesn't support families and children very well. UNICEF's report card illustrates part of the answer to "why". UNICEF's "league table" of country rankings^[2] shows how the 25 nations studied measured up on 10 key indicators 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 -- eight-ten checkmarks were the "social democratic states" (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Iceland). Only Sweden met all ten indicators that had been designed to assess staff:child ratios, ECEC training, accessibility, provision of public funding, etc. in childcare and kindergarten. Canada was (tied with Ireland) at the very bottom, meeting only one indicator.

This picture illustrates that political ideas or ideology are critical in shaping social programs, and that certain political ideas help us understand why ECEC in Canada is the way it is. Three types of countries have been described by Danish sociologist Gosta Esbing-Andersen, writing about differences in how advanced capitalist states (or 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.

In this scheme, countries like Canada are described as emphasizing "the privacy of the family and the primacy of the market". Liberal welfare countries 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 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 report card and the OECD study show -- this means ECEC provision that is generally poor or mediocre.

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

These characteristics go back to Canada's beginnings. When Canada was established in 1867, some powers -- taxation, defence, 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 not chosen to establish high quality, widely accessible ECEC systems on their own.

Political ideas and structures like federalism are translated into politics that -- at a practical level -- ultimately determine what kinds of wages and recognition early childhood educators have, what kinds of buildings ECEC programs are in, who maintains and cleans them, whether parents can afford the fees -- basically, how ECEC is provided "on the ground" for families and children.

How can we do better?

But today international research tells us about much more than Canada's ECEC laggard status.

The body of research provides valuable practical information about how we can do better: what kinds of ECEC principles and policies work best to ensure equitable access for families and to support children's development and well-being with high quality programs.

We have learned that:

- A system, not a market, is the basis for accessible, high quality programs.
- 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.
- Infrastructure is important, with one government department -- preferably education -- taking the lead. Infrastructure should include legislation, standards and ongoing quality improvement.
- The most effective ECEC systems are well planned at all levels, with targets and timetables, using the best available knowledge, by knowledgeable policy makers.
- 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 programs to cover costs -- not 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 the key to quality, and that good wages and working conditions, and respect for the work are key to ensuring a high quality ECEC 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.

Today the problem is not so much not about knowing what or how Canada can do better. In short, Canada's problem can be summed up as "not enough money, not enough policy". There is excellent knowledge about what policies and practices work to support 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.

Today, most Canadian families have changed. Most young children have a working mother; the historical male breadwinner family is increasingly rare and no longer universally desired. At the same time, most Canadians have come to understand the developmental or educational value of good quality ECEC programs.

We often hear that good ECEC makes good long-term and short-term economic sense, and the research supports this. But most of all, ECEC 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 21st century evidence rather than on 19th century approaches that do not work.

While it may not be possible for Canada to become Sweden, there is considerable ground for becoming a better Canada.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: federalism ^[4]

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