

Activists, policy sedimentation, and policy change: The case of early childhood education in Ontario ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Abstract:

In 2010, the Government of Ontario enacted Bill 242, which amended the Education Act to allow schools and school boards to operate a full-day learning program for four- and five-year-olds, as well as an extended day-care program. The objective of this essay is to explain the adoption of this unique program. The author argues that the adoption of Bill 242 can be traced back to the mobilization of Ontario early childhood education activists at different levels, from the local to the international, from the 1970s onward, which left policy sediments that formed the basis of the new legislation.

Introduction:

In 2010, the Government of Ontario overhauled early childhood education in the province. With the passage of Bill 242 (the Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act), the government amended the Education Act to allow schools and school boards to operate a full-day learning program for four- and five-year-olds, as well as an extended day-care program. According to the legislation, a certified teacher and a registered early childhood educator would provide the full-day learning program. At the same time, responsibility for child-care policy was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education to ensure a better integration of services. The full-day learning program started rolling out in September 2010, with the intention of making it available to all four- and five-year-olds by 2015-16. It has none the less remained the object of considerable controversy in Ontario, with some political actors and commentators objecting to the cost, design, and even philosophy of the program.

Over the last two decades, a number of countries and jurisdictions have adopted similar programs of early childhood education and care (ECEC) that represent a significant policy departure from previous approaches (Moss 2006; Ganathan 2011). First, these changes integrated two programs, early childhood education and child care, which had often operated separately and according to different logics (OECD 2006). Second, in many Anglo-Saxon countries and jurisdictions, they constituted a clear break from the targeted approaches to early childhood education that had prevailed (Wincott 2006).

One explanation for this change in Ontario's early childhood education regime is offered by the highly influential punctuated equilibrium model of policy change, or what Michael Howlett and Benjamin Cashore have presented as the "post-incremental" orthodoxy (2007, 50). According to this perspective, periods of institutional inertia are followed by rare critical junctures or focussing events during which exogenous shocks provoke path-shifting institutional transformation (Hall 1993; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins 1993). I argue in this essay that this model of policy change fails to capture the gradual and significant changes that have, over 30 years, facilitated the adoption of Ontario's new approach to early childhood education. Rather than being the product of an external shock, Ontario's approach to early childhood education can instead be traced back to incremental endogenous changes within the policy sub-system. While social policy scholars such as Paul Pierson (1996) have stressed the capacity of activists and voluntary sector actors to protect existing programs, thus contributing to institutional stability, this essay argues that these actors were instrumental in driving such endogenous policy change in the first place. Similar critiques of the punctuated equilibrium model have become common in the literature since Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen's ground-breaking book (2005) on institutional change; the key contribution of this article is to stress how the multi-level character of the state contributes to gradual endogenous policy change. Specifically, I demonstrate that Ontario-based activists used the multi-level character of the state in a strategic manner to embed at different levels of the state policy sediments that contributed over time to the transformation of the province's approach to early childhood education.

The essay draws on policy documents and interviews with 15 activists and policy-makers at the local, provincial, and federal levels. Some of the respondents were at times activists and at other times policy-makers, providing a unique perspective on the transformation of ECEC in Ontario. Archival research was also conducted in the Canadian Women's Movement Archives at the University of Ottawa. In the first section, I briefly discuss the relationship between child care and early childhood education, which is essential to understanding the Ontario story. In the second section, I present the theoretical framework guiding the subsequent analysis. I draw on the concept of policy

sediments to emphasize the key role of activists in transforming social policy and stress how they used the multi-level character of the state to further their agenda. In the third section, I set the stage for the ensuing discussion of the transformation of Ontario's ECEC sector by presenting the responsibilities of the different levels of government and introducing some of the key actors and organizations. Finally, the remainder of the essay examines how the mobilization of activists in the 1970s contributed to the gradual transformation of Ontario's approach to early childhood education.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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