

Election 2015 blog: Another view of Canada's childcare debate: Comments from a Finnish researcher ^[1]

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Child Care NOW federal election 2015 blog series

Child care has become a key issue in Election 2015. To support the public interest and political debate, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's blog, Child Care Now, will be published each week between August 12 and October 19. Blogs will be topical, based on such questions as: What is a "national child care program"? Why does Canada need a national child care program? When we say "high quality affordable" child care, what does this mean? What else do families with young children need, and what's the difference between other family policies (like a child benefit) and child care? The blogs may be based on available documents, some may be written by guest bloggers and they may also be circulated by sources other than the CRRU website, such as rabble.ca.

Another view of Canada's childcare debate: Comments from a Finnish researcher is the seventh blog in the series.

All blogs in this series may be found on the [CRRU's website](#) ^[3]

Another view of Canada's childcare debate: Comments from a Finnish researcher

As an early childhood researcher newly arrived from Finland, the current Canadian debate about universal childcare has been somewhat baffling. In Finland, universal early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) means that if a child's parents want her/him to attend, the municipality in which they live is obliged to provide them with a place irrespective of the parents' work/life situation. Childcare is heavily publicly funded, with a maximum monthly parent fee equivalent to a few hundred Canadian dollars per month. Fees, which are based on parent income and family size, cover approximately 14% of the total cost of ECEC. In international comparisons, the quality is considered quite high.

Thus, I was quite surprised to read a recent working paper by Canadian authors Baker, Milligan and Gruber arguing that universal childcare causes harm to a child's longer-run development. In the early childhood field, large-scale studies reporting the effects of publicly-organized systems are usually based on rich longitudinal data utilizing "repeated measures research design" (that is, the same children would be studied over time). Although the cohort design used in the Baker, Milligan and Gruber working paper can—at its best—perhaps provide some insights, it is very important to contextualize the results.

As well, based on earlier longitudinal studies, such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education in Europe, the Early Head Start Project in the US and the Sydney Family Development Project in Australia, we know that in looking at childcare's effects, it is important to consider how it is organized. The Baker et al study of the impact of Quebec's childcare system fails to consider this aspect as well as the other possible changes in the society that might explain the results.

Overall, it does not provide adequate evidence for the argument it aims to make.

Current research suggests that an integrated system based on the idea of holistic development and learning, with a strong focus on play and other child-initiated activities, has positive impacts on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. In Finland, integrated holistic early childhood education and childcare means that learning takes place in everyday activities, in play situations and in interaction with adults and other children. There aren't separate institutions for childcare and early childhood education; the terms "kindergarten" and "childcare" are used interchangeably.

As well, Finnish parents view early childhood programs as a place for the child to play, to learn social skills and make friends. Although academic skills are included in the everyday activities of early childhood education and childcare settings, they are not viewed as the first priority. As I understand it, the move to universal full-day kindergarten in much of Canada has been motivated by a similar philosophy.

There is no evidence to suggest that early childhood education and childcare that is sensitive to a child's needs and to the ways small children learn would have any other than a positive impact on children.

In Finland, universal access to childcare was originally introduced to support women's labor market participation. However, today the benefits seem to be far wider. Publicly-funded and organized childcare decreases the need for other kinds of social benefits and increases the tax revenues by enabling parents to participate in the labor force. It also has the potential to increase social mobility. It's also important to note that research shows that market-based early childhood education systems do not achieve the same degree of equity as do more publicly-managed and publicly-funded systems.

As in Canada, child: staff ratios and qualification requirements for staff are regulated by law in Finland. Finnish early childhood teachers

have bachelor's degrees related to early childhood education and autonomy over the curriculum. This foundation offers a good basis for educators to develop their pedagogies with parents and children. Since one standard model of early childhood education may not fit every child and family, in Finland, individual ECEC plans are created for each child in collaboration with the family.

In Finland, parents also have the option of taking care of their children themselves full-time by taking advantage of the home care allowance (following maternity and parental leave) which is provided until the youngest child of the family reaches the age of three. The amount of home care allowance varies depending on income, the size of the family and the municipality they live in. The average is equivalent to CDN\$600 a month with 88% of families utilizing the home care allowance to some extent. Most commonly, it is used for up to seven months with 16% of families using it for more than 24 months. Parents can also choose a private provider but only 5% of families do so. Thus, although the early childhood program is provided universally, it is not imposed on parents who may make other choices supported by public policy.

Some link the fact that Finland has consistently been among the highest scorers worldwide in international assessments of student performance to the good beginnings provided by universal early childhood education and care. Certainly from a Finnish perspective, universal access to affordable, good quality ECEC services establishes a good starting point. We are such a small nation that we can't afford to waste the potential of any of our children.

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