

What we ask of parents: Unequal expectations for parental contributions to early childhood and post-secondary education in Canada ^[1]

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Introduction

With respect to primary and secondary levels of education, most countries have a fairly simple policy: it should be compulsory and provided free of charge to all citizens. Families are permitted to opt-out in various types of ways – homeschooling is sometimes permitted, and private education thrives in many countries as parents seek alternatives to public education for reasons of conscience or prestige – but the basic principle remains: education is compulsory, and whoever wishes to take it through the public sector, can do so for free.

In addition to compulsory education, however, there are two non-compulsory forms that are widely used: child care or early childhood education (ECE),¹ and post-secondary education (PSE). In these areas, policies on family contributions are quite different. In Canada at least, there is a very clear user-pay principle for both of these types of education. However, the user-pay principle is alleviated to some degree by an ability-to-pay principle, such that the contributions demanded of parents vary substantially with income. In the case of ECE, this variation is controlled directly through price: lower-income parents pay reduced fees, and provincial governments compensate the education provider directly. In the case of PSE, fees are formally the same for all; however, subsidies delivered through the student financial assistance (SFA) system create implicit differences in net pricing. For those students designated as “dependent” (that is, those four years or less out of secondary school, and not having been in the labour market for more than two years), parental contributions to education are estimated directly as a function of income, and thus net tuition will, *ceteris paribus*, be an inverse function of parental income.

In the field of PSE, the principle of “net tuition” is at least somewhat understood in Canada; our own previous publications such as *The Many Prices of Knowledge* (Usher, Lambert & Mizrazadeh, 2014) have provided some contribution to this field. However, in the field of ECE, the concept of net fees is absent. Though the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) has developed a helpful compilation of child-care fees in major Canadian cities (MacDonald & Friendly, 2014), and there have been good comparisons of provincial child-care subsidy policies (Beach & Friendly, 2005), no one to our knowledge has put the two together, and looked at “net fees” in the same manner as that on the PSE side.

This is unfortunate as even the most casual glance at the two sets of policies suggests that the way Canadian governments subsidize these two types of non-compulsory education are totally different, and it is not immediately obvious why this is the case. Our purpose in this paper is therefore to compare the different expectations governments have with respect to parental contributions to their children’s education at the ECE and PSE levels. We do this by first looking at costs, subsidy policies, and the intersection between the two by income level in ECE and then PSE (Section 2). In Section 3, we combine these analyses to show the extent to which – at every level of income – parents of children in ECE are generally required to contribute more than parents of children in PSE. In our conclusion (Section 4), we do not make any call for action, or express a preference for one level of subsidy over another; instead, we simply offer some observations on the sources and consequences of government policies, and offer some suggestions for future research.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: parental involvement ^[4]

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