

Early Years Policy Innovations Across Canada

A Policy Success?

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Introduction

The Canadian welfare state was largely built on male-breadwinner/female-caregiver norms regarding employment policy, and morally regulative ‘cause of need’ rather than ‘fact of need’ social policy provision that discriminated against particular groups of women, especially those marginalized by race, sexuality, and class (Brodie, 2008, 166; Little, 1998; Valverde, 1991). The dominance of the ‘worker-citizen’ paradigm of a working father and stay-at-home mother as the ideal meant that policymakers tended to cast childcare as a ‘women’s issue’ and primarily as a family responsibility (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004). For those who fell outside the norm of male-breadwinner/female-caregiver norms, such as single mothers, state assistance ‘often involved surveillance, conditionality, social stigma, and low levels of provision’ (Brodie, 2008, 169).

While this gendered institutional order (Ritter, 2007) embodied by male-breadwinner norms and stigmatized social assistance has largely been replaced by gender equality norms in labour markets and in some social policies, vestiges of the previous gendered institutional order continue to linger in government policies and programs. Gendered understandings of the appropriateness of certain government interventions and, in the case of early years policy, the norms of care, have become embedded within governing structures. As such, despite progressively shifting narratives about early years policy—from family-oriented, to women’s rights oriented, to children’s rights oriented—these entrenched norms continue to persist in policies and institutions, even as the original political logics behind existing early years policy have broken down. Reforms have also been resisted by socially conservative actors, including Conservative-led federal and provincial governments supportive of the traditional gendered division of responsibility for care (White, 2017).

Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that on several important measures, Canada's record on early years policy cannot be claimed as a resounding success. Canada measures well behind its counterparts in the OECD with respect to government investments in children (UNICEF Canada, 2020). Canada has developed a fairly middling policy approach to maternal and parental leave policies. UNICEF (2020, 6) ranks Canada 24th among rich countries, and 26th in terms of support for child poverty. It ranks Canada 28th among rich countries in terms of investments in children and families, including early childhood education and care (ECEC). However, these aggregate indicators mask some important policy diversity within the Canadian federation. Bright spots within the early years landscape—at both the federal and provincial orders of government—warrant exploration, and deserve to be cast as successes in policy development that can either be replicated across other provincial jurisdictions or explored further by other national governments.

Canada's federal system has both created opportunities for and, in some cases, impeded the successful evolution of early years policy. Federal government investment in early years programs is limited by the constitutional division of powers, which grants substantive jurisdiction over social policy to provincial governments. The federal government's use of its spending power for early years policy has waxed and waned over the decades and the federal government has mainly relied on tax instruments and intergovernmental transfers to incentivize provincial action. Ultimately, the bulk of early childhood care and education (ECEC) programming lies with provincial governments, which regulate care provision, make determinations over social assistance for care (e.g. public subsidies), and develop policy around early learning.

To capture the resultant complexity, this chapter covers early years policy innovations across both the federal and provincial orders of government in Canada. We examine the federal Child Tax Benefit (CTB) program, first introduced in 1992, and expanded and consolidated in the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) in 2016; Ontario's full-day kindergarten (FDK) model introduced in 2011; and Québec's maternity and parental leave benefits introduced in 2006. We touch briefly on Québec's subsidized childcare model as part of the larger suite of family policies introduced by Québec in the 1990s and early 2000s, but as this policy is given a much fuller exploration by Burlone in Chapter 6 in this volume, we have condensed our analysis of it. We investigate the political and policy design features that have contributed to these varied policy successes, both within the jurisdiction adopting the innovation, and across jurisdictions. In each of the three policies profiled in this chapter, we begin by reviewing the ideational and institutional evolution of early years policy.

We highlight the role of the federal government in leading the ideational shifts seen throughout the decades (through several commissions and task forces on the issue), while also illustrating how, and in what ways, the federal and provincial governments have innovated on institutional design and implementation.

In providing this history, we consider the scope and limits of policy paradigm change around children and families and maternal employment. Our chapter pays particular attention to post-1990 reforms that entailed a paradigm shift in policy-making to focus on the child rather than mothers (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004) and human capital development concerns (Prentice, 2009) as part of an anti-poverty and child school readiness strategy; to use tax instruments directed to families rather than funding program development; and to ignore feminist arguments around gender equality in care and employment (with the important exception of policy developments in Québec in the 1990s).

A Broadly Based Policy Success

In exploring questions of policy success, federal systems such as Canada offer an opportunity to examine several jurisdictions for examples of promising policy innovations. Literature that examines the role of veto points and veto players on policy innovation notes that federalism is one of the key institutionally generated veto points that can make it difficult to construct a win-set to alter the status quo (Stepan and Linz, 2011, 844). Scholars have argued that federalism is gendered; federal structures, practices, policy arrangements, and intergovernmental relations often affect men and women differently, and provide these groups with different opportunities to make change (Vickers, 2012; Gray, 2010). Nonetheless, federalism maintains the potential to advance policy innovation (Chappell and Curtin, 2012), and is a key factor shaping the dynamics of government investment in early years policy development.

In order to measure policy success, we look to both provincial and federal orders of government to identify potential policies for analysis. We apply the same set of metrics across both orders of government, exploring the degree to which our cases of provincial and federal policy innovation meet the metrics of success regarding programmatic, process, and political features, as well as policy consolidation over time (see Table 7.1). These ratings are grounded in an analysis of the empirical case studies that follow. While we indicate our overall assessment in dichotomous (success/not) terms, our case analysis examines the degrees of success on each of these dimensions.

This chapter examines the political and policy design features that explain these varied policy successes. As one of the clear promises of federalism is the potential of 'successful' policies to be taken up and emulated, we conclude with an exploration of policy emulation. We discuss the relatively uneven experience of policy emulation of these policies across provinces. While Ontario's 2011 FDK policy has seen considerable emulation, Québec's suite of family policies, including subsidized childcare and a more robust parental leave program, have seen a much more limited uptake across the Canadian federation. We trace this variability to

Table 7.1 Metrics of Success

Case	Jurisdiction	Metrics of Success—‘Performance’			
		Programmatic	Process	Political	Endurance
Canada Child Benefit	Federal	✓	✓	✓	✓
Full-Day Kindergarten	Ontario	✓	✓	✓	✓
Maternity/Parental Leave	Québec	✓	✓	✓	✓
Subsidized Childcare	Québec	✓	✓	✓	~

important differences in the policy ideas and narratives that shaped provincial policy debates and explore the implications for the future evolution of early years policy in Canada.

Case Study 1: Canada Child Benefit

Despite playing an important role in shaping the evolving narrative around early years policy, the federal government has largely been reticent to engage in the development of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Instead, the federal government has relied primarily on its tax and transfer capabilities to carve out a more limited role in early years policy, but one which nonetheless affects the lives of children and families throughout Canada. Prime Minister Trudeau’s 2016 announcement of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) marked the consolidation (and enrichment) of federal early years policy. The CCB combined several existing cash transfers, both income-tested and universal, into a cash transfer for parents of young children. The existing benefit itself is a tax-free payment of up to \$6,400 per child under the age of 6, and \$5,400 per child for children aged 6–17. Total payments begin phasing out at net household incomes above \$30,000, but with the enhanced benefit structure, most families found themselves better off under the new CCB. The CCB—like its predecessors—was aimed at reducing child and family poverty and improving the lives of lower- and middle-income families. Yet, in consolidating and expanding the existing framework (both eligibility and the progressivity of benefits), the federal government—once again—largely left the provision of ECEC to the provinces.

Contexts, Challenges, and Agents

Calls for a more comprehensive policy approach to reconciling work and family life date back to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which released

its report in December 1970 (Bégin, 1992). Among its 167 recommendations, the Royal Commission recommended that the federal government establish a national maternity leave program and that 'the federal government immediately take steps to enter into agreement with the provinces [and territories] leading to the adoption of a national Day-Care Act' (Government of Canada, 1970, 411). The Commission specifically recommended a cost-sharing model to build and run childcare centres that met a minimum standard threshold for quality, including cost sharing for operating costs, and (for the first seven years) cost-sharing of capital expenses, as well.

While the recommendations did not lead to immediate political uptake or implementation, they cemented childcare as a policy issue worthy of the national spotlight and childcare became a fixture on political agendas over the next several decades. In 1984, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau set up a federal Task Force on Childcare. Like the Royal Commission before it, the Task Force recommended that the federal government develop a national and universal childcare program, to be designed and managed provincially (Status of Women Canada, 1986). However, the timing of the report was less than ideal; a recent federal election had resulted in a change in the governing political party, and the report was shelved. The new government under Prime Minister Mulroney convened a Special Parliamentary Committee on Childcare whose recommendations led to the introduction of Bill C-144, The Canada Childcare Act. However, the proposed legislation was opposed by childcare groups, such as the Canadian Day Care Advocacy Association (1988), for a number of reasons, including the funding of commercial childcare. Thus, following the 1988 federal election, the issue once again fell off the agenda. Federal investments to increase childcare spaces were part of the Liberal Party's 1993 election platform (the 'Red Book'). However, once elected, the new government faced significant deficits which, combined with the politics of a post-referendum Québec, pushed the creation of a comprehensive childcare policy to the back of the federal political agenda.

Design and Choice

Throughout the 1990s, the childcare policy debate at the federal level experienced a broad narrative shift about the nature of the policy problem. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s focused on childcare as a feminist and women's equality issue, the 1990s focused increasingly on the child, with solutions designed to supplement the incomes of low-income families and reduce child poverty (Dobrowlowsky and Jenson, 2004). Additionally, a growing consensus amongst federal policy actors asserted that ECEC was primarily a provincial problem, one which the federal government could supplement in part through intergovernmental transfers, and more directly through federal tax relief for families. This jurisdictional divide, combined with the changing nature of the policy narrative, saw the federal

government increasingly focus its attention on child poverty as the ‘problem’ worth solving. Moreover, the government addressed the problem through relatively straightforward tax credits and tiered income benefits, policy designs that could be implemented without raising jurisdictional concerns, and which would easily build on its existing policy capacity and history within this field. Thus, in 1992, the federal Conservative government under Prime Minister Mulroney eliminated the universal family allowance and created a more targeted Child Tax Benefit (CTB). The CTB was designed for low- and middle-income parents of children aged 0–17, delivered as a refundable tax credit, which was means tested, and based on the number of eligible children in a family. The CTB also included a supplement for low-income working parents (the Working Income Supplement).

Financial restructuring by the federal Liberal government in the mid-1990s led to the elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP). CAP had treated childcare like other welfare services, stipulating that federal funds only be used for services for low-income families. Under the CAP, the federal government had funded 50 per cent of provincial subsidies to provide regulated and non-profit childcare for low-income families (Friendly and White, 2007, 187). However, the 1995 federal budget introduced the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), a block funded program that replaced a number of programs including the CAP. The move to the CHST eliminated federal targeted childcare funding, leaving provincial governments wholly funding childcare subsidy programs.

In 1998, the federal government expanded family benefits by transforming the CTB into the more comprehensive Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). Compared to the CTB, the new CCTB increased benefits to all low-income families and removed work requirements associated with the Working Income Supplement. The CCTB also included the Child Disability Benefit for low- and moderate-income families caring for children with disabilities. The CCTB was also augmented with a new program—the National Child Benefit (NCB) Supplement—designed to specifically target low-income families with children. Under the NCB, the federal government provided low-income families with a cash benefit supplement.

In its earliest form, the NCB was ill-received by social groups as being both too little, in terms of the amount of the benefit, and too targeted in nature. Additionally, there was very little consciousness about the program itself (Battle and Mendelson, 1998). Another downside of the NCB was that provinces could—at their discretion—subtract the dollar value of the NCB benefit from provincial social assistance (welfare) supports to families (Milligan and Stabile, 2009). While those cost ‘savings’ could then be applied to other provincial programs and child benefits, provinces turned those savings into a variety of provincial approaches and supports (Milligan and Stabile, 2011). By the end of the 1990s, federal policymakers and provincial policymakers alike had largely turned their attention away from ECEC policy, and instead focused on the development and introduction of tax mechanisms to support low-income families.

Delivery and Endurance

The federal policy focus continued to shift during the early 2000s, as the scientific community began to consolidate around a social investment framework for early childhood programming (and as federal finances began to stabilize after years of hawkish deficit reduction policies) (White, 2017). In response, political discourse moved briefly beyond the tax and transfer system and the discussion at the federal level became less about whether to create a national childcare program and more about how to do so.

Intergovernmental dynamics remained paramount, with questions around financing and whether provinces would agree to any strings. Nonetheless, in the early 2000s, the federal Liberal government under Jean Chrétien signed two major funding agreements with provincial governments: the Early Childhood Development Initiative in 2000, and the Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Childcare in 2004. That latter agreement committed provincial governments to invest in childcare that met the 'QUAD' principles: that is, of high quality, universally inclusive, accessible, and developmentally appropriate (Friendly and White, 2007, 189). The minority Liberal government under Paul Martin committed to expanding early learning and childcare financing, striking bilateral deals with provincial governments in 2004–2005 to spend \$5 billion over five years on registered childcare (Collier and Mahon, 2008, 111).

This investment frame, however, was highly politicized and contested. In the lead-up to the 2006 election, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper took aim at the bilateral accords, casting them as out of touch with the needs and wants of Canadian parents. He accused the government as wanting to make childcare choices for parents by ploughing 'all available money into one option, that of supporting institutional day care centres' (White, 2017, 211). When the 2006 federal election toppled the Liberal government, the new Conservative minority government withdrew from the bilateral agreements. Instead, the Conservative government diverted the intergovernmental transfers into the creation of yet another cash transfer to parents in the form of the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB). The UCCB distributed a taxable benefit of \$100 per month per child under the age of six (Collier and Mahon, 2008, 110). Meanwhile, the NCB and CCTB remained intact. In 2015, the UCCB was increased to \$160 per month per child under six, with an additional \$60 per month for children aged 6–17 (Government of Canada, 2018).

The most recent iteration of this policy has been expansionary in nature. In 2016, under the frame of assisting the 'middle class and those seeking to join it', the newly elected Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau introduced the Canada Child Benefit (CCB). The new CCB replaced the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), and National Child Benefit (NCB)—streamlining all three federal programs into a single means-tested cash

payment to parents of children aged 0–17. In removing the universality of the UCCB, Trudeau commented that the only parents who would be ‘losing out’ under the new benefits scheme were those at the highest household incomes.

Conclusion

Despite moments of federal political interest in supporting provinces in ECEC delivery (most notably the bilateral federal-provincial agreements under Prime Minister Paul Martin), for the most part (and until very recently), the federal government has ‘stayed in its lane’ and limited its engagement in early years policy to cash transfers. The CTB, first introduced in 1992, has been added onto, transformed, supplemented, and ultimately consolidated over successive Liberal and Conservative governments. Its bipartisan support suggests a policy framework that is relatively robust and unlikely to see significant retrenchment in the future. While the 2016 CCB suggested that the current government was content to stay within the cash transfer realm, hints of a more interventionist federal government approach became more visible in federal spending priorities. In 2017, under the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework the federal and provincial and territorial governments developed bilateral agreements. Through these agreements, the federal government provided \$1.2 billion over three years to provinces to make ECEC enhancements and increase licensed childcare spaces ([Government of Canada, 2020a](#)). In the April 2021 federal budget, the Liberal government pledged \$30 billion over five years of conditional grants to finance a national ECEC system ([Government of Canada, 2021a](#)). This pledge became a cornerstone proposal in the 2021 federal election, which the Liberal party won, forming a minority government. The 2021 federal budget committed \$30 billion over five years, with \$9.2 billion every year thereafter, with the funds directed at reducing fees for ECEC to an average of \$10 per day in regulated care, increasing the number of regulated childcare spaces across provinces, and supporting training and wage enhancements for ECEC workers ([Government of Canada, 2021b](#)). As of writing, ten provinces and three territories have signed bilateral agreements with the federal government, with details regarding implementation to follow.

Case Study 2: Ontario Full-Day Kindergarten

Provinces have substantive responsibility for the development and implementation of childcare and education policies. The ideational shifts present in the evolving federal policy focus were, in many ways, mirrored at the provincial level as provincial governments recognized the need for what have been labelled as social investment policies and programs ([Garritzmann et al., 2018](#); [Häusermann, 2018](#)).

As the federal government eschewed more interventionist means of engaging in the policy space, relying primarily to cash-transfer mechanisms for policy alleviation, provincial policy actors have played an important role in reforming early years policy, subject to the vagaries of provincial politics. Provinces have developed a range of programs aimed at subsidizing the cost of childcare for low-income parents, invested in free early-years programming for families, and in some cases (Québec, and increasingly British Columbia) engaged in significant investments in creating high quality and low cost childcare. One area that has seen provincial-level policy innovation in early years policy through the lens of social investment is the expansion of public education systems to include full-day kindergarten. While provincial funding for *childcare* has been fairly modest (with the notable exception of Québec), provincial governments have moved progressively to expand public education programming to include younger children.

Contexts, Challenges, and Agents

Until the early 2000s, only three provinces provided full-day kindergarten programming for five-year-olds. New Brunswick had developed a voluntary program in 1992, while Québec and Nova Scotia introduced voluntary programs in 1997. Both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick transformed their programs into mandatory full-day kindergarten in 1998 (CNLEEC, 2010). Interest in early learning of this form largely stalled until the 2000s, as provincial governments began to take up the new policy narrative around the social investment frame, tapping into the emerging scientific consensus around the long-range social and economic benefits associated with early childhood education (White, 2017). Leading the way on this new form of early years investment was the Province of Ontario, which launched a provincial commission to study full day kindergarten in 2007, and implemented its FDK program for four- and five-year-olds in 2010.

The election of a Liberal government under Dalton McGuinty in 2003 marked the start of an important shift in early learning investments. After years of political strife between educators and the former Conservative government of Mike Harris (and briefly Ernie Eves), McGuinty styled himself as the ‘education premier’ looking to reinvest in public education, improve provincial literacy and numeracy rates, improve high school graduation rates, and mend relations with the teachers’ unions (Campbell, 2020)

While childcare investments did not make up much of its first election platform, once elected, the McGuinty government took a more expansive view towards early years policy. It began by creating a new Ministry of Children and Youth Services, which was tasked with developing Ontario’s Best Start strategy. Introduced in 2005, the Best Start Plan included investments in quality and affordable childcare, a new policy around childcare subsidies—moving from a means assessment

to an income assessment—and a new college of early childhood educators to establish and maintain professional standards. Importantly, Best Start marked a notable shift in the provincial narrative of policy interventions, moving from anti-poverty to a narrative of social investment (including the need to invest in children to improve the future economy, address school readiness, and promote equal educational opportunities for children from all backgrounds). Government communications announcing the strategy noted that ‘Best Start will provide many more families with easy, affordable access to services and supports, so that all Ontario children can arrive in Grade 1 healthy, ready, and eager to learn’ ([Government of Ontario, 2005](#)). Largely missing from the conversation, however, was any mention of closing the gap in maternal labour force participation and women’s equality in the workplace; moreover, the plan still took on a mostly targeted approach, with the identification of priority neighbourhoods and communities for early policy implementation.

While Best Start was introduced in 2005, it was not until the 2007 provincial election that the McGuinty government began to move substantively on full-day kindergarten. Unlike in 2003, the 2007 election campaign foregrounded early years policy as an election issue: in its provincial election platform, the government committed to ‘appoint an Early Learning Advisor to advise the Premier on developing and funding a full-day pre-school program’ ([Ontario Liberal Party, 2007](#), 18). Immediately after the government’s re-election in October 2007, the premier appointed Dr. Charles Pascal as the special advisor on early learning.

Design and Choice

While the Best Start Plan indicated some early design ideas regarding early years learning for four- and five-year-olds (noting an expansion of early learning using junior and senior kindergarten), the government remained open to a range of policy instruments for implementation. Throughout 2008, Dr. Pascal travelled throughout the province convening 83 community fact-finding roundtables. In interviews, Pascal floated ‘trial balloons’ and raised design ideas such as whether children should be taught by early childhood educators or by teachers, or whether kindergarten classes could be located ‘off-site’ in non-school buildings such as community centres, childcare centres, churches, and workplaces ([Mahoney 2008a](#)). Groups of parents, community organizers, and the broader policy community—including the Elementary Teachers Federation and the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association—responded. They favoured a model in which young children would receive ‘the best quality education at a school with fully certified teachers delivering the program’ ([Mahoney 2008b](#)).

Dr. Pascal issued his final report in June 2009; in it, he recommended the implementation of a play-based learning model of full day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds. He recommended that kindergarten classes be taught by a certified teacher, with an early childhood educator (ECE) in the classroom to assist with learning. Finally, he recommended that the new full-day expansion be located in schools, to enable seamless services for before and after school care. Shortly following the release of the report, the McGuinty government announced its full support of the recommendations. Implementation began in September 2010 with schools in priority low-income neighbourhoods and areas where capital development was not needed ([Ontario Office of the Premier, 2009](#)). By 2014, full implementation of full-day kindergarten was largely complete.

Delivery and Endurance

Within the province of Ontario, full-day kindergarten has proven remarkably resilient, both programmatically and politically. The engagement of both experts and the public in the process of designing the program resulted in a policy design that has proven to be both enormously popular and quickly institutionalized ([Millar et al., 2020](#)). While technically voluntary in nature, parental take-up of the program has been very high, with over 90 per cent of eligible children enrolled in the Ontario FDK program. Given its popularity, the program's design and price tag have been able to withstand both political and administrative attempts to undermine it.

The first attempt to undermine the program came just one year into the five-year implementation schedule, during the 2011 provincial election. The election campaign began with then-Opposition leader (and Progressive Conservative party leader) Tim Hudak promising to end the program and associated spending. Facing strong public support for the program, Mr. Hudak reversed his position part way through the election campaign, although the reversal ultimately did not save his campaign ([Cohn, 2011](#)). In 2012, the province's commission on public service reform recommended cancelling (or at least delaying) the program as a cost-saving measure for a province facing fiscal tightening after the 2008 financial crisis; Premier McGuinty rejected the suggestion. Most recently (in 2019), current Conservative Premier Doug Ford and his education minister, Lisa Thompson, backtracked on comments that suggested full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds was at risk of cancellation under the new government. The suggestion received significant backlash from Ontario parents and teachers' unions, and any changes were seemingly sidelined from the agenda ([Rushowy, 2019](#)). Thus, with over a decade now elapsed following the initial roll-out of the FDK program, funding, program design, and delivery are both intact and largely entrenched.

Conclusion

While the voluntary FDK program is a clear case of both political and programmatic success, provincial governments have been reluctant to move beyond FDK and radically expand regulated childcare in the province. The social investment frame, while successfully utilized for the expansion of *education* to include children age four and five, has not been significantly activated as a rationale for investing in *care* opportunities of younger children. Even the Liberal government under Premier Kathleen Wynne, following a spate of child deaths in unlicensed care in 2015, shied away from implementing a universal licensing system for Home Child Care (HCC) as part of its modernization of childcare legislation and regulations (White et al., 2018). It continues to allow unlicensed HCC facilities to operate in a virtually unregulated manner. Some more recent provincial investments in expanding the availability of public subsidies for low-income families and wage enhancements for childcare workers (under the Wynne government) were largely retracted following the 2018 election of the Conservative government under Doug Ford (Monsebraaten and Rushowy, 2019).

Case Study 3: Québec Maternity and Parental Leave and Investments in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

While most provincial governments in Canada mirrored the ideational shifts of the evolving federal policy narrative, a notable exception—both narratively and programmatically—is Québec. Like other provinces in the 1990s, the Québec government faced similar financial pressures and demands for deficit reduction; yet, it introduced significant early years and family policy investments which have expanded and endured as a policy regime. As Burlone's chapter in this volume assesses the endurance of Québec's childcare policy, our primary focus is on the maternity and parental leave policies which, along with childcare, labour economists have praised as generally bolstering maternal employment (Baker, Gruber, and Milligan, 2008; Zhang, 2007). However, we will reflect on some of the endurance challenges associated with the entirety of the family-focused policy framework in recent years.

Contexts, Challenges, and Agents

After the defeat of the sovereignty referendum in 1995, the provincial Parti Québécois looked for ways to distinguish itself from the rest of Canada and built a distinct set of social programs reflecting what Arsenault (2018) calls a 'social economy' approach. While the federal and other provincial governments focused their

attention on anti-poverty policies and targeted spending to the poorest, most 'deserving' children and families, the Parti Québécois government under Premier Lucien Bouchard responded instead to shifting labour markets and growing demands for policies to balance work and family life. In 1996, Premier Bouchard convened employers, labour union representatives, and other nongovernmental groups at a Summit on the Economy and Employment. The attendant task force's work, along with a 1997 White Paper on family policy, shifted the provincial government's approach away from traditional pro-natalist approaches to family policy (Jenson, 2002; Maroney, 1992) to instead support maternal employment as part of a larger provincial labour market strategy and to improve child development (Arsenault, 2018; Fortin, 2018). Jenson (2002, 312) notes the influence of 'feminists, the family movement, anti-poverty activists, social workers, and experts on development and early childhood education, as well as municipal government and the provincial public sector'.

The pillars of reform included a provincial family allowance in the form of a refundable tax credit that varies by income; government financing of childcare programs for children aged 0–4 years so that parents paid a flat fee of \$5 per day; and an expanded system of paid parental leave (Tougas, 2002). The \$5 per day scheme rolled out over four years, and was fully implemented in 2000 (Fortin, 2018, 2). A precursor to the reforms in Ontario, the Québec government expanded its voluntary kindergarten program from part- to full-day for all five-year-olds (as well as a small portion of four-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, mostly in the city of Montréal). In advancing a nationalist and feminist policy agenda within the province of Québec, the provincial government largely stepped outside ideational trends in the rest of Canada and began developing policy separate from the federal government. With regard to child benefits, the province elected to stay outside the National Child Benefit (NCB) program introduced by the federal government, instead instituting major reforms to its own child benefits system in 1997 and 2005 (Milligan and Stabile, 2011). Until the 1997 reforms, families were eligible for a family allowance, a young child allowance, and a newborn allowance (Milligan and Stabile, 2011). The allowance increased with the number of children and did not depend on family income. In 1997, these programs were combined into a new family allowance with a minimum level for all families and a claw back for higher income families (Milligan and Stabile, 2011).

Québec's maternity and parental leave was similarly built separate from the federal model. Québec's Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) program built on, and expanded from, the federal Employment Insurance (EI) architecture. However, the program faced a rockier implementation that involved a protracted battle with the federal government over whether the federal government would agree to reduce its share of EI premiums collected in Québec so the Québec government could collect its own premiums to finance a more generous scheme (White, 2006, 331). The federal and Québec governments finally reached an agreement in 2006

to allow Québec residents to access regular EI and special benefits but held the province responsible for its own maternity and parental leave program (Mathieu et al., 2020, 174). Thus, the program is not severed completely from the federal EI program. And eligibility for both programs rests on labour market attachment (Mathieu et al., 2020, 175).

Design and Choice

QPIP has two components. Parents can choose between a ‘basic plan’ that covers a longer leave period but at a lower remuneration rate, or a ‘special plan’ that comprises a shorter number of weeks at a higher wage replacement rate. The basic maternity leave benefits plan pays 70 per cent of average weekly earnings for up to 18 weeks. The special plan pays 75 per cent of average weekly earnings for up to 15 weeks. Parents are also eligible for an additional 32 weeks of parental leave paid at 70 per cent of average weekly earnings for the first 7 weeks, and 55 per cent of average weekly earnings for the other 25 weeks; or 25 weeks at 75 per cent of average weekly earnings. The Québec government also encourages fathers to take up to five weeks of leave paid at 70 per cent of average weekly earnings, or three weeks paid at 75 per cent of average weekly earnings. Additionally, it provides adoption benefits and maternity termination benefits (Government of Québec, 2020).

Québec’s plan is thus far more generous than federal EI benefits; as of 2020, parents can receive up to \$1,103 per week compared to \$573 under federal EI (Mathieu et al., 2020, 175). Moreover, QPIP covers a larger share of workers, including employers, those who are self-employed, engaged in part-time or contract work, and even some students, and there is no unpaid two-week waiting period (McKay et al., 2016). Qualifications are based on flat-rate earnings from the previous year rather than accumulated hours, which means those who may not qualify for benefits under federal EI are eligible for QPIP (Mathieu, 2020, 175). Outside the province of Québec, stricter eligibility requirements mean that many parents are ineligible for paid leave. McKay et al. (2016) found nearly four in ten mothers outside Québec do not qualify, either because they are not employed in jobs that are EI eligible, or they did not accumulate 600 hours of insurable employment prior to applying for leave. Meanwhile in one in three families with a new child, neither parent claims EI family benefits (Robson, 2017, 20).

Delivery and Endurance

While it is difficult to assess the likelihood of policy endurance around QPIP, to date, there have been no significant political or programmatic threats to its

maintenance within Québec. One likely factor supporting its endurance is the relatively anemic federal policy framework that exists as the alternative. Québec parents know that they are better off under the current policy regime, fulfilling both the nationalist and feminist visions of the program's early creation.

Other parts of Québec's family policy framework, however, have been more contested. In particular, Québec's record in terms of childcare is more mixed. The universal childcare subsidy program is comprehensively covered in Chapter 6 so we only briefly mention it here. But, as we note below, problems with Québec's childcare model—notably poor quality overall that tracked with the expansion of the commercial sector and family childcare—have emerged. The original coalition of actors who supported educational childcare broke down with the election of provincial Liberal governments in 2003. While the \$5 per day flat fee was increased to \$7 per day in 2003 by the new Liberal government (Jenson, 2009), the more substantive shift was in how the Liberal government responded to growing demand for care services. Instead of continuing to build capacity through increased public investments in cooperative and not-for-profit models, the Liberal Party responded to increased demand for spaces by permitting the growth of for-profit centres. The government also enabled the expansion of family childcare providers, including unlicensed providers, which has also meant more varied quality of childcare (Fortin, 2018). Access to high quality care is stratified, with higher income families tending to have greater access to the centre-based nonprofit programs and disadvantaged families having to rely on lower quality and unlicensed care (Fortin, 2018; Japel, 2008; Japel et al., 2005). Politically, however, the program remains quite popular, and families in Québec have pushed back against some programmatic changes. In 2015, the flat fee was replaced by a sliding fee scale based on parental income (Fortin, 2018, 2) but in 2019 the CAQ provincial government returned to a flat fee system of \$8.35 per day (Famille Québec, 2020).

Conclusion

Québec policy investments are largely successful within-jurisdiction but have faced more narrow success in terms of emulation outside of its borders. We attribute this limited success to divergence in norms and attendant policy frameworks since the 1990s. Both disrupted the liberal welfare model typical to the rest of Canada in favour of a social economy model (Arsenault, 2018; Jenson, 2002), and resulted in very different gendered institutional orders in Québec vs. the rest of Canada currently. Perhaps as work-family norms shift in the rest of Canada, Québec may prove to be a source of policy learning and emulation. Indeed, the recent federal investments reference using the Québec childcare system as a model for affordable and accessible care (Government of Canada, 2021).

Analysis: Lessons from Canada's Early Years Policies

What lessons can be drawn from the case of early years policy development in Canada? And to what extent can we declare Canada to demonstrate policy success? In terms of Canada's economic and social well-being, gender equality norms have not been fully institutionalized although there is evidence that gender equality norms have emerged in Québec. Furthermore, new social investment norms and programs that have been tracked in other OECD countries have been less fully implemented in Canada (Garritzmann et al., 2018; Häusermann, 2018). Some have, though, as we have tracked in the cases examined in this chapter.

The mix (and variety) of provincial and federal action on early years policy draws attention to the fact that solutions to policy problems usually entail more than one policy. This is particularly true in federal states where opportunities for government action may be available at both federal and subnational orders of government, even where jurisdictional boundaries limit action. Federal systems foster opportunities for policy innovation, as well as opportunities for policy learning. The innovations seen at the federal government level have been in areas where the government holds exclusive jurisdiction and has mainly relied on tax instruments and intergovernmental transfers to incentivize provincial action, the most successful being the CTB and variants, most recently the CCB. Policy-makers outside Canada have touted it as a model to the world about how to support families through the federal tax system (Sherman, 2018). We rate this program in its current form a policy success.

With jurisdiction over early years policy held predominantly at the provincial level, we might expect that early years policy would be a space for emulation across the federation. On the question of policy emulation—that is, the degree to which a successful provincial policy framework is adopted or adapted by other governments within the federal system—early years policy suggests that learning is contingent and tied to the narrative frames associated with the different policy proposals put forward, as constituent governments have responded to their population's distinctive values. In this case, 'good ideas' have been left on the table, at the expense of policy effectiveness (Bakvis and Skogstad, 2020).

Of the provincial policies profiled in this chapter, we observe highly variable experiences of policy emulation. On the 'successful' side of policy emulation, the introduction of full-day kindergarten in Ontario triggered uptake by other provinces; its diffusion was likely enabled by its reliance on the narrower framing of the policy goal of education, which built on existing institutions. The policy has been taken up both politically—being advanced as a successful model for improving education and early learning—and programmatically. Whereas FDK was limited to only three provinces in the 1990s, today seven provinces and one territory offer full-day kindergarten for children age five and up, namely: British Columbia, Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, PEI,

and the Northwest Territories (Pelletier, 2017). We are also seeing program expansion by age. The Northwest Territories adopted a similar program to Ontario with FDK beginning age four, and both Québec and Nova Scotia have announced plans to expand early learning through kindergarten and universal preschool programs, also beginning at age four (Lau, 2019; McIsaac and Turner, 2019).

More on the side of ‘failed’ emulation are the innovative family policies coming out of Québec. Despite the relative success—both politically and programmatically—of the policies that Québec adopted in the 1990s, these policies have largely not diffused outside provincial borders. In terms of horizontal emulation (that is policy uptake by other provinces), only now, over 25 years after Québec’s policies were introduced, are we beginning to see steps towards universal government-subsidized childcare. Prior to the federal government’s commitments following the 2021 election, the most significant steps had been in British Columbia and Newfoundland, as well as a since-cancelled pilot project in Alberta (CBC News, 2020; CBC News, 2021). However, several of these pilots and programs have primarily emulated the flat-fee portion of the Québec model, ignoring many of the strategic investments in capacity and quality that were so important to the early successes seen in Québec. The Province of British Columbia shows the most promise as a case of policy learning, moving beyond the fee structure to forthcoming investments to assist unlicensed providers in becoming licensed, training early childhood educators, and creating new funds for operating and maintenance costs (Government of British Columbia, 2018; Saltman, 2019). Meanwhile, no other province or territory has shown interest in emulating the parental leave policy introduced by Québec in 2006.

We are also beginning to see evidence of vertical emulation, as the federal government also stands to learn from elements of Québec’s early years policy. In the 2020 Fall Economic Update, the federal government announced its intention to invest in early childhood education noting that as ‘Saskatchewan once showed Canada the way on healthcare and British Columbia showed Canada the way on pricing pollution, Québec can show us the way on childcare’ (Government of Canada, 2020b). The federal government has also emulated aspects of QPIP, although it still leaves many gaps for parents in terms of eligibility and generosity. Compared to the QPIP program, federal benefit rates under both standard and extended benefits, as well as the shared benefit, remain low. Nonetheless, building from the QPIP model, and in an effort to encourage fathers to take parental leave, as of 2019, the federal government added five weeks of a ‘Parental Sharing Benefit’, providing ‘use it or lose it’ additional time for a second parent.

Until very recently, outside of Québec, most early years policy has been guided by instrumentalist arguments about preparing children for school (school readiness) and the labour market (job readiness) and as part of anti-poverty strategies. That social investment focus has meant a successful consolidation of only a narrow range of programs. This has meant that institutional arrangements (outside

Québec) were predominantly guided by norms about what we can do for kids, not women (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004), a feature well-exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic that has forced mothers to absorb the care and work responsibilities in the home (Johnston et al., 2020). However, with the historical narrowness of federal involvement in childcare now in flux, how these institutional norms and structures intersect with a newly expansionist federal policy will be ripe for exploration and evaluation.

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