

PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT OF CHILD CARE: THE ISSUE OF AUSPICE

Three contextual (structural) variables have a demonstrated impact on the quality of child care programs. These factors are: regulation, funding and auspice. Research confirms that regulated child care is more likely to be high quality than unregulated care; funding has a positive impact on child care through staff and other program variables; child care services operated not-for-profit are more likely to be high quality than those operated to earn profits (Canadian Child Care Federation, 1993).

This does not mean that, by definition, all child care programs which are legally incorporated as not-for-profit are high quality and all those which are incorporated as businesses (or unincorporated) are poor quality. High and poor quality services may be found in all auspices. However, there is clear research evidence that not-for-profit services are significantly more **likely** to be assessed as higher quality and that services which are commercially operated (not not-for-profit) are more likely to be poorer quality (Friesen, 1995; Doherty, 1995).

Each of the three contextual factors - regulation, funding, auspice - is important. None of the three **determines or guarantees** high quality in isolation. Instead, each, through its impact on program-related factors (like wages and working conditions, training, staff turnover, staff morale, staff/child ratios, group size and other factors) makes it more likely that program quality will be higher or lower.

Before the 1970s, most child care in Canada was operated under Acommercial@ auspice. In 1968, 75% of Canadian child care centres were identified as commercially operated (Status of Day Care in Canada, 1971). Many of these programs were owned and operated by women, some with training in early childhood education, who chose to develop child care centres in a public policy vacuum; sometimes these owners made no >profit= and, indeed, may have supported the program through their low wages or commitment of personal resources. At the same time, entrepreneurs whose primary interest was in operating child care as a profit-making business established child care services in some parts of Canada. Neither of these approaches is appropriate to a conception of child care as a Apublic good@ (Cameron, 1994).

Over the years, not-for-profit, community-based and parent board-run child care has become the predominant model of child care in much of Canada and the commercial sector has declined relative to the non-profit sector in most provinces (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 1994). During this time, the issue of auspice, or who runs the child care program, has been a major issue in Canada child care at the national level, and in some provinces/territories.

In 1987, when the possibility of a national child care policy was discussed with the Mulroney government, the issue of funding to commercial child care services was pivotal. At that time, many groups with an interest in child care who challenged inclusion of commercial services in new national funding arrangements identified two reasons for their concerns: first quality and second accountability for public resources. The discussion, however, never moved beyond the debate stage to goals and concrete proposals for mechanisms to move towards them.

PROPOSITIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Proposition 1. Auspice is one important contextual factor which has an impact on the quality of child care programs.

Consistent research supports this proposition.

Proposition 2. As a long-term goal, Canadian child care should be delivered through not-for-profit services.

This goal is consistent with the guiding principles of accountability and high quality, and with a vision of Canadian child care as a planned, coordinated service which receives substantial public funding.

Proposition 3. To move towards the goal of a not-for-profit system of child care, a number of strategies can be employed. Different strategies or sets of strategies might be appropriate in different regions of Canada. However, the goal of a not-for-profit child care system should be a common one regardless of the region.

Potential strategies for moving towards a not-for-profit child care system:

- Revoke funding for currently funded programs which are not not-for-profit (as Québec has done).
- Direct new funding only to not-for-profit child care services (as Ontario did for a time).
- Establish funding and assistance programs to Aconvert@ to not-for-profit services (as Ontario did).
- Grandparent existing services which are not not-for-profit (permitting new funds to flow only to grandparented services, not new ones). (As Ontario did).
- Restrict new licenses only to not-for-profit services (as Saskatchewan did at one time).
- Terminate licences to child care programs which are not not-for-profit.
- Shift the responsibility for child care to a public service (like education).

Combinations of these strategies could be employed to move towards a goal of a not-for-profit child care system.

Note: It should be recognized that in some provinces/territories, the definition of Anon-profit@ and Acommercial@ child care services is not clear. These definitions should be cleared and resolved as part of the process of moving towards the goal of not-for-profit child care.

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