



Building a firm foundation for lifelong learning: The importance of early childhood education and care

"If the early foundations are not properly mastered, it will serve little purpose to develop a learning society that targets adults" (OECD, 1996).

Why lifelong learning?

In the 21st century, new technologies, rapid globalization, a shift away from traditional employment patterns and recognition that ongoing renewal of knowledge and skills is essential have contributed to a new emphasis on "lifelong learning". As the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) points out:

success in realizing lifelong learning — from early childhood education to active learning in retirement — will be an important factor in promoting employment, economic development, democracy and social cohesion (OECD, 1999: 13).

Economic and social goals

While there is a variety of overlapping arguments (the "learning economy" argument, the "speed of change" argument, the "active policies" argument, "the social cohesion" argument), there is broad agreement that lifelong learning has both economic and social motivations and implications. Thus, according to Canadian Policy Research Networks, *"skills, knowledge and innovation are the key drivers behind Canada's economic and social prosperity. This begs two closely linked questions: How can the benefits of prosperity be most widely shared? And, how can we foster prosperity by ensuring that all citizens have a chance to contribute? ... [in other words] "How do we make sure that nobody gets left behind in a learning society?" (2001).*

"Cradle to grave" — a life-cycle approach

There is general agreement that strategies for lifelong learning should incorporate a life-cycle approach so that a continuum of learning encompasses early childhood through youth, the working years and the senior years. Each stage in life has its own learning needs.

The report of a National Roundtable on Lifelong Learning commissioned as background to the Government of Canada's Skills and Learning Agenda describes a comprehensive learning system with a life-cycle approach as having *"four linked priorities:*

- 1) Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, making it an integral part of the learning system so that all children develop the skills they need to become lifelong learners.*
- 2) Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.*
- 3) Ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program diversity within Canada's higher education system....*
- 4) Enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills including new resources to permit disadvantaged groups to participate fully* (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2001).

Where does early childhood education and care fit?

There are two main reasons that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is indispensable in any successful strategy for lifelong learning. These can be characterized as "the best possible start in life" and "the ramp to women's equality" arguments.

The best possible start in life

Early childhood is the first stage of lifelong learning, shaping the individual's course as a learner over the life cycle. Abundant evidence shows that children who take part in high quality early childhood education programs will learn better in school. In this way, early childhood education can play a key role in assuring a firm foundation for subsequent stages. Indeed, ECEC is important for ensuring that each child "gets the best possible start in life".

The ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers

Access to reliable ECEC, or child care, is essential if adults — especially women — are to be able to participate in lifelong learning — secondary, post-secondary, apprenticeships and training programs, and other options— during the stage in the life-cycle when they are rearing young children. Evidence indicates that poor access to ECEC is one key factor that prevents women from participating in training or education (for example, KPMG, 1999). Without affordable, reliable child care, women may be compelled to remain out of opportunities for lifelong learning and ultimately be forced into poorly paid part-time employment or dependence on public assistance and poverty.

Characteristics of ECEC that contribute to lifelong learning

Universality

There is wide agreement that all stages of lifelong learning including ECEC should be available to everyone — all children, all parents in the population. This perspective is supported by research that shows that all children regardless of social class and whether their parents are employed or not benefit from high quality ECEC programs (Peisner-Feinberg et al, 2001). The idea that ECEC should be universal goes beyond a human capital rationale, however. Early childhood education and care contributes to social inclusion by helping to make equality of life chances and a basic level of well-being possible for all children and families.

High quality

The quality of ECEC services is absolutely critical in determining how whether they are educational and enhance child development or are merely “care” that supports parental employment. Indeed, “*the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science.*” (Shonkoff and Phillips 2001: 313).

A coherent approach

Delivering early childhood education and child care as one coherent high quality service allows both learning for young children and support for parental employment to occur. International policy research identifies the policy elements that are known to contribute to whether ECEC programs are high quality enough to serve as a foundation for children's learning and accessible enough to be a support to learning for parents. These are:

- A systematic, integrated approach to policy development and implementation.
- A strong role for the education system.
- A universal approach to access with particular attention to children in need of special support.
- Substantial public investment in services and infrastructure.
- A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance that includes goals, regulation and monitoring of all ECEC provision, government responsibility for funding and developing services and a pedagogical framework co-constructed through consultation with a range of stakeholders.
- Appropriate training and working conditions for staff.
- Ongoing and systematic data collection and a long-term research agenda (OECD, 2001).

Strategies for lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning – while a relatively new idea — has been embraced by a variety of government bodies (such as the European Union) as well as by civil society groups. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) — through its Education Committee — has taken the lead at the international level in research, policy and strategies for action on lifelong learning. At a 1996 meeting, Education Ministers from OECD countries (including Canada) issued a Communiqué committing to developing national strategies for lifelong learning.

One of the two areas that the Communiqué identifies as especially needing action is “*improving the foundations for lifelong learning...by...assigning high priority to the goals of improving access and quality in early childhood education*” (OECD, 1996). The OECD's international Thematic Review of early childhood education and care programs (2001) is one outcome of the Education Ministers' commitment that can assist member countries in fulfilling their commitments to lifelong learning.

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