



## **VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

### **Preschool Programs: Early Learning and Child Care**

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#### ***Policy Perspective***

Child care is known by a number of terms, including Early Childhood Education and Care; Early Learning and Care, and Early Childhood Development. The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) defines child care as a non-compulsory program that supports the optimal development and learning of children aged 0-12 years. At the same time, it enables parents to work, study and care for other family members and participate in their community; it provides supports and resources to help parents become active participants in their children's early learning, and promotes women's equality.

Because we are very concerned about the impact of policy development, research papers like those produced and circulated by the CEECD<sup>1-3</sup> are very important to our work. For example, the CCAAC recently completed a two-year project, funded by the Government of Canada, called "Pedagogy, Policy and Quality." The purpose of this project was to facilitate a national dialogue on curriculum issues in national policymaking, in order to establish a national pedagogical framework that will enhance children's early learning and development. This project came about following the release of *Starting Strong II*, a comparative report by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examining early childhood education and care programs and policies in 20 countries. Of all the countries studied, Canada was the only one that had not articulated a vision for early learning and child care.

Papers such as Kagan and Kauerz's "Preschool Programs: Effective Curricula"<sup>2</sup> were particularly helpful in setting the stage for this discussion. Often, people associate the word "curriculum" with formal education, thinking immediately of tests and lesson plans. Both the Kagan and Kauerz paper and the commentary by Jane Bertrand<sup>3</sup> open up a dialogue about what curriculum means in terms of young children. What are our goals for Canadian children during the preschool years? How concerned should we be about measuring children's development before they go to school—and why? What do we know about the impact of the quality of the environments and interactions in the early years? These are just some of the key questions.

Organizations like the CEECD also play an important role in synthesizing some of the international literature and drawing attention to research that truly reflects the Canadian

context. Too often, we are influenced by U.S. research that may not reflect the situation in Canada. For example, a number of U.S. studies have raised questions about child care having a negative impact on children's development. However, when interpreting these results, differences between the two countries must be taken into account. For example, whereas Canada has a relatively comprehensive parental leave program, enabling many families to stay home and care for their infant in that very critical first year, the U.S. does not have such supports in place. Therefore, when talking about the impact of centres or programs on children's development, we need to use caution to ensure we are looking at all of the Canadian factors.

*Gaps between research, policy and practice*

In general, the literature shows that quality in early education and child care leads to good child development outcomes. For many of us advocating high-quality early learning and child care, there is growing discontent with governments' lack of attention to these evidences. There is a belief by some that the care of children is a private matter and is the responsibility of families; however, children's well-being is a matter of public concern. Failure to make children's early years a priority results in much higher societal costs later on.

While the quality and quantity of early learning and child care programs varies from province to province, there is no jurisdiction in Canada outside of Quebec that has moved beyond the patchwork of services towards a *system* of quality affordable child care. The province of Quebec, has made the implementation of a universal child care system a high priority. When setting up its program, the Quebec government worked hard to develop standards and a curriculum, drawing on research and what we know from the experience of other countries. While it is not without its flaws, Quebec's system is the closest that Canada has to a universal child care program, similar to those in other countries.

Evidence also debunks the myth that publicly-funded programs of early learning and child care are too costly. When Quebec implemented its child care program, in the first year alone, the province had a 40% return on every dollar.<sup>4</sup> Canadian economists Cleveland and Krashinsky predict a return of \$2 to the economy for every \$1 invested in child care.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Schweinhart<sup>1</sup> highlights the importance of teacher qualifications, stating: "Effective preschool programs need qualified preschool teachers who know how to contribute to children's cognitive and social development and do so." At the moment, much of Canada's early learning and care arrangements are underground. By formalizing the system and professionalizing the workers, not only does the quality of care improve, but ripple effects can be seen across the economy.

There is growing awareness among parents and the general public that Canada needs to catch up to the rest of the world and do better to assist families and to provide support for early learning and child care programs. Finding a space in an early learning and child care program with qualified educators and quality programming should not be a matter of luck. We need to move away from ideological-driven decision-making and pay attention to the strong body of Canadian and international research and evidence.

Comments recorded by Eve Krakow

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