



## **VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

### **Early Learning Care and Education: Applying an Integrated Approach**

**Robin McMillan, Senior Consultant  
Canadian Child Care Federation, Canada**

*(Published online March 12, 2010)*

#### ***Service perspective***

Why integrate child care and school? The evidence is clear. OECD's report, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*<sup>1</sup> suggests governments should provide a more coherent system of early childhood services to working parents. This suggestion is based in research that indicates countries that integrate their care and education services for children under one ministry or agency generally achieve more coordinated and goal-oriented services of higher quality for young children aged birth to 6 years. The immediate and lasting positive effects of quality child care on language, cognitive development and school achievement are proven by numerous findings from longitudinal studies as well as smaller trials with long-term follow-ups.<sup>2</sup>

Why then in Canada as well as many other liberal economic nations, is there a split management approach to early learning?

The split-management approach stems from a common history amongst Anglo-American countries which established two different kinds of "care" and "education" systems for young children. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century child care institutions were established for abandoned or neglected young children as a social protection measure. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "infant schools" were established which served more affluent families and their desire to provide early learning opportunities for their children outside the home environment.<sup>3</sup>

After women joined the workforce in large numbers during and after World War II, there was an increased need for child care. These children were not abandoned or neglected but were in need of quality care due to mothers working outside the home. Parents are now interested in combining the two elements of "care" and "learning." While governments in the Scandinavian countries adapted child care to the changing needs of parents to combine care and education, many other developed nations kept the differentiation between care and education. Instead of following the Scandinavian example and establishing a central governing body for care and education of young children, the *care* fell under the supervision of a Social Welfare or Health Departments while the *education* of older children (3-5 year olds) was the responsibility of Education Departments.

While a new integrated sector has emerged across Europe, Canada lags behind. A reason for this stems from the government's view that early learning and child care is a private responsibility for parents. Is it the states' responsibility to provide pre-school education or is it a private responsibility of parents? The government's response to that question paved the way for how each country decides to deal with the care and education of its youngest citizens<sup>4</sup>. While many countries are under the influence of an integrated system that better supports life-long learning, Canada has not made a significant national move on this issue. Lack of national leadership has a lot to do with the fact that education and child care are under the mandates of each provincial government. The result of the existing fragmentation of services and lack of coherence for children and families is evident in Canada's patchwork approach to early learning.

There are a few examples of integrated systems which are starting up across the country. For example, in Ontario, a new program called "Full Day Learning" will be scaled up by 2015 for all 4- and 5-year-olds. This integrated model will have Early Childhood Educators working together with Kindergarten teachers to address the care and learning of a group of children.

While the English school boards in Ontario are getting ready to implement this model, it is important to note that all of Ontario's French-language school boards already offer full-time early childhood education programs in French. This integrated approach of full day learning for 4- and 5-year olds was built upon the belief that the earlier children are exposed to French, the greater the likelihood that they will acquire and develop strong language skills. Integral to their approach is building and maintaining close links between existing French-language day cares and French-language schools, improving the quality of the delivery of full-time early childhood education programs, and meeting the need for high quality materials and resources to support learning are the key interventions in *aménagement linguistique* for young children.<sup>4</sup>

There have been successful pilots of this approach in Ontario. One such pilot is the Toronto First Duty (TFD) project. The project began in 2001 with broad child development and parenting support goals and a vision of universally available, integrated early childhood services. In terms of achievements, comparisons across the implementation period showed that progress was made in each of the five sites on service integration as well as on program quality improvement. There was also evidence of positive effects on children's socio-emotional development and on parents' engagement with school and learning, using comparisons with matched communities without TFD programs.<sup>5</sup>

In another province, Prince Edward Island, a full day of learning approach that integrates early learning and care with the education system is also underway. Prince Edward Island will offer a full-day, school-based kindergarten program in 2010. A Kindergarten Transition Team is now working to transfer the program from the community to the school system. The team includes representatives of the Department of Education, school boards, and early childhood sector and partner groups.

In Quebec, there has been a lot of government support for early learning. This is evident in the subsidizing of child care spaces across the province which brought down the fees to \$7 per day for parents. At this point, this support for early learning has not transferred to a system of integration for the early learning sector and the education system. Children in Quebec are not required to attend school until the age of six. Prior to school age, the majority of them are in child care settings.

In order to see significant progress towards an integrated system, there must be leadership at the top, within all levels of government. Children's rights advocates in Canada have called for a national commissioner for children. A National Children's Commissioner as a focal point for children at the national level was also one of the recommendations in the Senate's 2007 study of children's rights in Canada, entitled *Children: the Silenced Citizens*.<sup>6</sup> As well as taking on issues such as the rights of children, this office could assist with pulling together a national framework that could lead the way for nation wide integration of the early learning and care approach within the education system.

How long will it take nations like Canada to adopt a fully integrated system? That is difficult question to answer. In the meantime, there are significant steps being made which will provide Canadian specific data and research on the reasons why supporting this approach should be undertaken.

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To cite this document:

McMillan R. Voices from the field – Early learning care and education: Applying an integrated approach. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2010:1-4. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/McMillanANGps.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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**This Voices from the Field is funded by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on ECD (SKC-ECD).**



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