

CONCLUSIONS

We believe, as we concluded at the end of our policy study on the costs and benefits of a universal program of early childhood education in Canada, that there are good reasons to invest considerable public money in child care. The phrase is hackneyed - worn thin by repetition at after-dinner speeches - but still true: children are our future. The benefits of developmental early childhood experiences to children and their families, and through them to society as a whole, are considerable. Many countries already provide extensive early childhood development services for children above two years of age; without any federal financial assistance, Quebec has begun to move in this direction as well.

When we began planning the symposium at which these papers were presented, our goal was to move policy discussion on from the "whether" to the "how" - that is, to move beyond the debate on whether or not Canada needs a child care program to a discussion of the details of how such a program might be implemented. As you have read, we defined a series of key unresolved policy questions that we thought might provoke useful debate among academics, policy experts, and policy advocates committed to child care. We hoped that those debates might help resolve some of the issues of policy design that would have to be decided before Canada could implement a national child care strategy.

Was the symposium successful? Did we feel at the end that those questions had been answered; did we know more about the "how" of getting a good child care program? What did we learn; how has our thinking been changed; what policy path should child care follow?

Alternatively, what do we still not know - that is, what issues remain to be resolved and what concerns still, potentially, lie between a conviction that Canada needs better child care and the nuts and bolts of designing a child care policy?

From the first session on federal-provincial issues we learned that the debate over whether child care is a federal or provincial issue - or, more specifically, whether the major stumbling block which has prevented the implementation of a child care program has been at the federal or the provincial level - is to some extent a red herring. Especially in the light of Quebec's recent child care reforms, it appears that the problem has been primarily one of political will at all levels, rather than of jurisdiction. Federal money will be essential in building a national program, but expanded political support for a specific set of child care and family policy reforms is the prerequisite - the *sine qua non*. Bob Rae and others reminded us of the necessity of building political coalitions in favour of child care at all levels. He argued, persuasively, that getting at least one provincial government (other than Quebec) to champion a provincial or national program of early education and care is an indispensable part of a political process for advancing child care on the policy agenda. The success and popularity of child care reforms in Quebec suggests that when appropriate coalitions have been built, and when political will is present, progress can be made quickly. At the same time, Martha Friendly made powerful arguments that there is no inherent barrier to federal leadership on child care issues - the Social Union agreement and federal leadership on child care policy reform can be entirely consistent with one another. If we are going to have a nation-wide child care program in Canada, the federal government will have to facilitate it by the judicious provision of an important part of the funding.

From the second session on quality care, there was substantial agreement, in relation to child care centres, on the benefits of spending additional dollars on staff training. As economists, we tend to focus on the tradeoffs among the various ways in which money might be spent. In other words, good quality child care might be achievable in a number of different ways (lower ratios but more training, higher ratios but less training, more training for directors and less for staff, etc.).

From this perspective, a discussion of child care quality might involve an enumeration of the key factors that might affect quality (e.g., various teacher characteristics, such as education, age and experience; staff-child ratios, group size and other elements of classroom structure; the size of the centre, type of programming, mix of children and other aspects of centre structure; characteristics of the director or administration of the child care facility; and auspice and amount of public support). Then, the discussion would proceed to evaluate the relative contribution of each of these factors to quality and the ways in which these factors complement one another or can be substituted for one another in producing good quality child care (e.g., do kindergartens and day care centres, with their very different combinations of staff-child ratios, group size, and staff education, both provide good quality developmental care?). Finally, with an eye to the costs associated with these different factors, we would determine the lowest cost way of meeting our quality objectives.

Most participants in the symposium felt, however, that at least two or three years of post-secondary training is an indispensable requirement for those people who would care for our

children. Put another way, although participants would undoubtedly agree that other factors - staff-child ratios, group size, programming, etc. - are important, they seemed to agree that the most important next step for increasing quality was a general rise in the training of caregivers. There was considerable discussion of the important benefits of this policy change, with some discussion of the potential costs, and techniques for implementation of these new requirements.

Quite aside from the issue of tradeoffs among various quality-enhancing factors within centres, there remains the related issue of the quality and appropriate role for family child care. Should the emphasis be on quality in centre-based facilities, or should quality in family child care be the biggest concern? There was no consensus, nor even agreement on whether family child care providers should meet a formal in-class educational standard in order to improve child care quality. The argument is two-fold: these caregivers do not have time or ability to upgrade in a formal setting, and, family child care providers tend to have extra experience in caregiving which can be traded-off against formal education in producing child care quality. This debate, though unresolved, stimulated considerable thought.

What was also clear, both from this session and the last one on the labour force, was that it is difficult to deal with the issue of what will happen to the current secondary labour force that now supplies most of the informal care in Canada. While many of these workers are, no doubt, dedicated and caring individuals, it is also true that child care has long been considered one of those jobs that virtually anyone can do. (It is, perhaps, instructive that Statistics Canada's National Occupational Classification groups informal child care providers along with cosmeticians, pedicurists, animal care workers, zoo attendants, astrologers, psychic consultants,

colour consultants, weight loss consultants, and home support workers. In other words, Statistics Canada views these different occupations as requiring approximately the same skill type and skill level). Insistence on post-secondary education would naturally change this. And many of those now working in the sector would, we suspect, not be able to obtain the new credentials.

Is it a problem if these workers are displaced from the child care workforce? What kinds of transitional arrangements should be contemplated? At this point, few policy experts have addressed these issues, at least in a public way.

From the third session on child care service delivery - community vs. school - we learned that the division between experts on this issue is more subtle than we had imagined. Most of the participants at the Symposium assume that child care services in the future will be delivered or co-ordinated by small non-profit community-based organizations. Even those who see the school system playing a major role in future delivery of child care services envision that in most cases the direct provider of service will be a small non-profit enterprise (under contract to the school system).

It is our suspicion that a Canada-wide set of early childhood care and education services, involving most preschool children, is likely to require a far larger bureaucracy than most of us currently imagine. Just think of the education and health systems, and the various organizations involved in planning, resource allocation and decision-making in these fields. Most participants at the conference were united on the importance of a strong measure of local control and direction over local child care services, whether those services are delivered in schools or not.

This is a conclusion with which we broadly agree. However, maintaining that local control in the face of a radical expansion of the child care system and its bureaucracy will be challenging.

These feelings are buttressed by the concerns of aboriginal child care experts. There are fundamental and serious aboriginal concerns about centralized control of early childhood education, stemming from the role of early education in the preservation and transmission of culture, and from the negative experiences of aboriginal Canadians with our school system. Concerns about transmission of culture are likely to be of importance to other communities in Canada as well, enhancing the need for parental involvement in programming decisions, and local control of many aspects of child care services.

From the fourth session on family policy, we confirmed our initial belief that child care policy cannot and should not be seen in isolation from other forms of family policy. Child care is only one of a variety of policies that affect families (e.g., parental/maternity leave, taxation, direct financial support for low-income families, social assistance programs) and designing a good child care program will require us to examine and amend some of those other policies. Furthermore, child care will be more important to some families than others, so that a truly equitable and popular early childhood policy will be one that meets a variety of different family needs within a range of policies.

Cross-national comparison of child care and family policy objectives and programs makes clear the important role of a country's values in developing early childhood policies. No country is politically or socially homogeneous, so there are inevitable value conflicts (over the

appropriate labour force role of mothers of young children, over the role of the state in family life, over the appropriate assistance to provide to single-parent families). Different family policy packages resolve these social and value conflicts in different ways. Further, the balance of different policies in each country is adjusted frequently through time.

It is useful to compare policy generosity, and family outcomes in different countries. On balance, when we do this, Canada does not compare favourably with other developed countries, although we are not at the absolute bottom internationally. The second lunchtime speech also addressed some of these international issues, and suggested, correctly we believe, that Canada is on the verge of choosing whether, in the case of child care, it will predominantly follow the U.S. free market model or the a more socially-oriented European one. The implications are profound for all aspects of policy towards early childhood development and families.

We were ourselves the authors of one of the papers in the fifth session on lone parents and child care policy. Thus we had some strong views on the need to adjust any new child care policy to account for the work disincentives built into the social assistance system.

We took as given that most families would pay something for child care. This is the norm in Sweden, Denmark, and some other countries for financing their child care systems. It also conforms with CPRN (Canadian Policy Research Networks) findings that most Canadians feel more comfortable with government support for child care services if parents share some of the costs directly. Parents' financial contributions have been a key element of the recent child care initiatives in Quebec. Notwithstanding this, there was considerable support at the Symposium for

the view that no fees ought to be charged for child care services. We suspect that this issue will have to be worked out over time, if only because of its impact on the cost of any comprehensive program.

We were forcefully and frequently reminded that there is no "typical" lone parent family, and that meeting the various needs of different families will continue to require subtle and complicated program design. Furthermore, recent research in Hamilton, Ontario, has confirmed that good child care can play a key role in meeting the needs of disadvantaged children and their families, while dramatically reducing medical and other public costs. As a result, the social benefits of providing child care and recreation programming for lone-parent families can be particularly high.

Finally, the sixth session emphasized the important role that organized child care workers play in serving as advocates for improved child care. However, as we suggested earlier, the evolving nature of the workforce under a national child care policy will require some hard choices. These apply both to those people currently working in the informal sector, as well as the role of family day care in a centralized system. Currently, centre care accounts for only about 30% of the extra-family care provided to children ages 2-5. It is hard to imagine that this number will not grow dramatically within any comprehensive program. The questions still to be resolved is whether there will continue to be much of a role for the informal caregivers now providing the 70% of the care for young children.

So far, this conclusion has focused on the lessons we learned from each session, rather

than on the overall issue of where child care policy should be headed. This focus on specific issues mirrors our bias in setting up this symposium. We believe that advancing the cause of child care requires, at this point in time, as much or more attention to the detailed road map than to the broader advocacy questions of why we need better child care services (we have played our own role in addressing the latter, of course). Nonetheless, we find it impossible to conclude this volume without some reflection on the future - some gazing into the fabled crystal ball. Do we see a genuine possibility of a successful strategy for child care reform in Canada?

These are the best of times and the worst of times for those concerned about policies for young children in Canada.. Never has there been more recognition of the importance of good quality developmental child care to the early lives of children, no matter what their parents' work status. Never before has there been a province willing to commit itself financially and politically to a universal early childhood education program as has Quebec since 1997. Never before has the federal government been so flush with cash at a time when children's needs are on the political agenda.

And yet, these are also the worst of times. Never in the last couple of generations at least, has the Official Opposition party in parliament - the government-in-waiting - been so deeply conservative on family matters as is the current Opposition. At the same time, the two leading English Canadian provinces are dominated by popular and powerful leaders, apparently likely to stay in power for some time, to whom universal child care appears as anathema. Further, the provincial/territorial climate for federal initiatives on an area of predominantly provincial/territorial jurisdiction is decidedly inhospitable, partly because of past federal actions.

In this context, it is not possible to foresee how federal and provincial/territorial policy on early childhood care and education will evolve over the next years. Our personal conclusion at the end of this symposium is that it will not evolve positively without some federal leadership and monetary commitments - beginning with the commitments on maternity and parental leave and benefits and moving on to specific commitments on the funding of services. Further, we believe that the emerging child care “system” will have definite provincial idiosyncracies, designed by provincial governments to suit their interpretation of local needs, values, political sensitivities, and financial abilities.

In all cases, the child care system will, whether it is offered through schools or not, will need to have a community service orientation and be integrated with other early childhood services rather than being seen as being bureaucratically delivered. Different types and forms of child care services - full-day and part-day, in centres, in family homes, in children’s homes, with strong parent-participation or with less - should be offered together in a community, so all families will view the services as “our” services, rather than as “their” services.

Universally accessible child care, if it is to be sufficiently politically popular to survive, will have to be only one component of a broader family policy. The CPRN¹ and the recent report by Judge McCain and Dr. Fraser Mustard² have framed early childhood education appropriately as part of a societal strategy for young children - part of a “best policy mix”. Universally accessible child care must continue to evolve from its recent status - viewed as the partisan policy weapon of one part of the political spectrum, serving the needs of one type of family - towards being a part of

all agendas, with services for all types of family.

These are the conclusions that followed out of the Symposium, and which will continue to guide our future actions. As authors, we left this Symposium and its debates feeling optimistic about the potential of cross-Canada child care policy reform. Taken individually, none of the barriers we had emphasized in establishing the agenda appear to be overwhelming. Once we agree that the benefits of good child care outweigh its costs, there is no insurmountable barrier, except the lack of political will, that faces policy makers in designing and implementing universally accessible, good quality, early childhood education and care programs for our young children. Our children - all of our children - deserve to have available a flexible, responsive, community-controlled system of early childhood services.

1. Sharon Stoick and Jane Jenson, *What is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Young Children?*, 1999. CPRN Study No. F09. Ottawa: Renouf.

2. McCain, Margaret N. And J. Fraser Mustard, *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: The Early Years Study Final Report*, 1999. Toronto: Government of Ontario.