

CHAPTER SEVEN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An appropriate policy on Early Childhood Education and Care would be based on the following propositions or principles, derived from the material presented in the chapters above:

1. *The early years are critical* – The years before children are in compulsory schooling are crucial because the development of children – physically, socially, emotionally, behaviourally, cognitively – is so concentrated in the early years. Giving children an equal start in life means providing resources for them when they are very young. The returns to our investments in children have a high payoff because of two factors: the long horizon over which the payback occurs, and because getting it right at the beginning is much easier and cheaper than fixing it later.
2. *As a society, we are underinvesting in the early years* – We invest about 40 times more public dollars into education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Canada than we do in providing early education for young children in their preschool years. Yet the effects of a dollar spent on young children would appear to be at least as great, probably greater, for younger children as for older. As Nobel prize winning economist James Heckman writes “In the long run, significant improvements in the skill levels of American workers, especially workers not attending college, are unlikely without substantial improvements in the arrangements that foster early learning. We cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene.” (Heckman, 2000, p.39; see also Carneiro and Heckman, 2003).
3. *There are strong public benefits of well-designed ECEC programs* – It is well known that there are important public benefits of education spending, through the effects on the productivity, good citizenship and lower crime rates of those being educated. There are equally important public benefits of facilitating the labour force attachment of parents. David Dodge, Governor of the Bank of Canada, discusses another important public benefit, related to the aging of Canada’s population: “The challenge will be to deal with a shrinking share of Canadians of labour force age. One way to deal with this is to postpone the average age of retirement. A second, and very important way, will be to make the process of human capital formation more efficient, so that people enter the labour market earlier and better prepared.... ...investment in ECD pays double dividends – one, it increases the efficiency of, and reduces the remediation costs in, the schools; two, it enables people to leave the formal education system earlier, thus meeting the demographic challenge.” (Dodge, 2003, p. 8).

4. *Other countries are investing more in lifelong learning* – Although the Canadian federal government has significantly improved the length of maternity and parental benefit payments and has provided encouragement to provinces and territories to develop programs aimed at early childhood, most provinces have been slow to embrace Early Childhood Education and Care as a priority (with the obvious exception of Quebec). The pace of development of ECEC policy and services in many countries has been swift in recent years. Even the United Kingdom, Australia and the Netherlands, whose policy traditions might be considered similar to Canada and the U.S. have recently made a priority of significantly expanding access to ECEC services. Countries who are much poorer than Canada on a per capita income basis, such as Portugal, Spain, Czechoslovakia, or New Zealand have placed a high priority on the development of ECEC services. Measured by dollars spent or services provided, Canada lags behind many other countries in providing early learning and care for its young citizens.
5. *The quality of ECEC provided is fundamental to the public (and private) benefits gained* – All the evidence we have (see the recent review of literature on the science of early childhood development in Shonkoff and Phillips, 2001) argues that ECEC programs can have overwhelmingly positive or somewhat negative effects on children and that the nature of effects depends directly on the quality of care experienced by the child. Therefore, the quality of services is a primary policy concern and tends to determine decisions about how services should be delivered and how services should be funded. The most fundamental ECEC policy decisions tend to be those affecting the tradeoff between ECEC quality and costs of provision, or ECEC quality and complete liberty of parental choice.
6. *Although there will be both universalist and targeted elements in any ECEC program, the fundamental objective should be to provide services to most or all children* – The 25% of children who are “vulnerable” to behavioural or cognitive problems in Canada are found to be spread across all income groupings, not strongly concentrated in low-income families. Although the benefits of good quality early childhood learning and care services may be especially positive for children from low-income families, ECEC can have important positive effects for children from all different backgrounds. Once we start considering ECEC as the first stage of most children’s education, the motivation for universal services becomes clear.
7. *The design of early childhood education and care policies and services should facilitate parental employment* – Of course, parents should be free to choose whether they seek employment or do not. And, of course, ECEC services should encourage and support early learning for all children, not just those whose parents are in the labour force. However, it is not possible to ignore the origins of the widespread use of non-parental care by preschool children: the rapid and continuing growth of labour force participation by

mothers of young children. A sensible and efficient policy on Early Childhood Education and Care will be one which expands children's capacities and helps parents balance their work and family lives at the same time. As Dr. Fraser Mustard and Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain put it "It is not possible to implement Early Childhood Development programs in the 21st century without also providing nonparental care." (2002, p. 31). In their cost-benefit analysis of good quality ECEC programs in Canada for children from 2-5 years of age, Cleveland and Krashinsky found half of the benefits were due to the effects on children, but the other half were due to short and long term benefits to families and society from enhanced labour force attachment of parents (1998).

8. *Parenting matters most to the early development of children, so parenting and ECEC services must be complements rather than substitutes* – Early learning and care services, particularly when they are of high quality, have important positive effects on children, and tend to offset family-based sources of risk. However, parenting is a much stronger influence, and an enduring one. This is one reason why a system of ECEC services and programs is important – with maternity/parental leave complemented by income and parenting supports and by a network of different ECEC services and early childhood development programs in local communities. As recommended by McCain and Mustard, and as implemented in Quebec, ECEC services are as much a part of family policy as they are education/human development policy. The point of making good quality ECEC services accessible to families is to provide some building blocks for positive family functioning in a new era dominated by parental employment.

Recommendations

There are two fundamental recommendations in this report.

The first is that senior and junior kindergarten in the Province of Ontario be made full-day, with lunchtime supervision included and that the Ministry of Education be responsible for developing complementary integrated services to provide care for children outside of school hours and outside of the school year. Full-day senior and junior kindergarten should be free of charge (and non-compulsory), as at present. School boards may charge parents for the use of complementary services. There should be sufficient provincial funding to ensure that these complementary services are financially accessible to all families.

The Ministry of Education should devote additional resources to developing comprehensive curricular support for kindergarten programs, recognizing the importance of developmentally-oriented play, particularly in this new format. The Ministry should commence or sponsor a longer-term research program examining the impact of different curricular approaches, and examining

the impact of different staff-child ratios, teacher training levels and other factors in determining the effects of kindergarten programs on children socially, emotionally, physically, behaviourally and cognitively.

The second principal recommendation of this report is that the Ontario Government should provide funding to permit the development of a network of good quality Early Childhood Education and Care services, initially for children at age 3 and gradually moving downwards to provide care to children of younger ages. These services must be of good quality (initially reflecting at least a score of 5.0 on the Early Childhood Environments Rating Scale or the Infant-Toddler Environments Rating Scale). These services would include licensed child care centre programs, nursery schools and regulated family homes, licensed by the provincial government and regulated under the Day Nurseries Act, and other forms of services as appropriate (e.g., drop-in centres, in-home caregivers).

These services would be community-based, with funding and planning and co-ordination of services handled through municipal and local authorities (with most of the funding originally provided by the provincial and federal governments, and overall planning of service provision and public accountability by the provincial government). Local access to services and information to parents about available services would be co-ordinated through a neighbourhood hub of early childhood services (either through the existing Early Years Centres or not, as appropriate locally).

These ECEC services would provide full-time learning and care for children with employed (or student) parents and part-time learning and care for families with one parent at home. Different provider groups would be encouraged to provide different curricular orientations or specializations (e.g., musical, physical, artistic, science) within the context of a quality program. The provincial government would stimulate a serious research program to assess different curricular and other approaches to provision of ECEC services. The services would be provided at a modest fee to parents (the \$5 per day fee is one possible model; a sliding scale based on income is another). In order for services to be universally accessible, fees could not exceed 3%-5% of after-tax income.