Upstream childcare policy change: lessons from Canada

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In their day-to-day interactions with children, childcare leaders naturally focus on the local scale. Every day, in programs and in front-line settings, it seems to make the most sense to centre on children's immediate needs. Sometimes, however, our reflex to focus on the local scale and immediate needs doesn't lead to best outcomes.

There's a well-known story that illustrates the problem. A kind traveller comes across a large river with a high waterfall. At the bottom of this waterfall, hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save children who have fallen over the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many children as possible, the traveller begins to run along the riverbank. One of rescuers calls out, "Don't leave! There are so many people that need help here." The traveller replies "I'm going upstream, to find out why so many children are falling into the river!"

From this parable comes the metaphor of 'upstream' change – solutions that need to be enacted well before a problem manifests itself. Upstream thinking means investing wisely for future success, rather than spending all our time and resources responding to problems.

Good social policy demands upstream thinking. The policy environment shapes our capacity to offer quality early childhood care and education to young children and their families. Urie Bronfenbrenner's famous theory of social ecology (1979) is based on this insight: Bronfenbrenner's model is a bullseye of concentric rings, starting with the individual at the centre, then moving outward through the micro-system, into the meso-system and the exo-system, all the way to the macro-system. At each step, social policy sets the parameters for each ring, regulating what is possible.

Tackling the nested ecological ring of policy environments is challenging, and

it asks early childhood educators to step outside their comfort zone, usually beyond their professional training (which too rarely addresses macro-system policy). Often, early childhood educators feel they don't know enough about social policy to make recommendations or to offer better solutions – even when they suspect that systemic 'upstream' change is necessary.

Beginning in 2013, in the prairie province of Manitoba, Canada, a group of early childhood educators, allies and activists decided it was time to tackle the province's childcare policy architecture. They designed an innovative campaign with an upstream focus, and proposed it to their provincial government. They asked officials to establish a Commission on Early Learning and Child Care. Remarkably, official decision-makers accepted the call, and launched a Commission. In this article, I review the Manitoba social movement campaign for a new policy architecture.* Manitoba is more than 13,000 kilometres from Australia, but there are lessons for Australians interested in upstream change, because both countries share important similarities when it comes to childcare policy.

Childcare policy in 'liberal' welfare states

Social scientists have carefully studied the varied social policy architecture of many countries. Researchers have assessed the balance of responsibility for social care as it is distributed across governments, the private market, the family, and civil society (made up of community organisations): in which countries are services mainly provided by governments? By commercial entrepreneurs? By family members? They've tracked whether citizens receive cash transfers or are provided with concrete services; whether eligibility for programs is designed to be universal, or is provided to just the most needy; they've studied if policy is generous or miserly. They've closely investigated whether some kinds of social policies contribute to greater gender equality; whether policies are oriented to all families or if traditional nuclear families get better treatment; and they've investigated the pay and working conditions of care providers.

From this broad research, 'three worlds of social welfare' have emerged (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Social scientists have identified that that modern western industrialised countries cluster into three basic types, which have been named the liberal, conservative and social-democratic regimes.

In the 'liberal welfare regimes' of the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, the policy architecture for childcare shares some problematic similarities: it relies on demand-side funding (such as fee subsidies) rather than direct funding of services (also known as supply-side funding); liberal regimes prioritise private markets; and they typically treat childcare as a commodity for sale by private owners to private buyers (Orloff, *et al.*, 1999). Most of the time, receiving public assistance means qualifying through an income or means test. In the 'liberal' model, governments provide very modest universal transfers or feeble social insurance plans. Public benefits cater mainly to a low-income clientele. Families are expected to provide for their own care needs, or to purchase it themselves.

A major similarity among the liberal welfare regimes is a 'split system' of care and education. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK established high quality public education systems for all children quite early in the 20th century, providing services to all children. By contrast, early childhood care and education (ECE) services were initiated by the voluntary sector instead of the state. What were originally called 'nurseries' and 'daycare' were associated with charity and welfare, rather than universal education. This legacy means that whereas education covers the whole population at no cost, childcare services are scarce, expensive, and are often provided on a for-profit basis in the private market. Although qualified teachers are employed by the public school system, staff in many childcare programs have weaker or no qualifications and earn pitifully low wages.

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Other social policy regimes organise childcare, as well as all social policy, using different principles (Olsen, 2002). In the Nordic states of Sweden, Denmark and Finland, the social policy architecture is radically different. In these 'social democratic' states, benefits are universal and widespread. Access to benefits and services is based on citizenship, and the generous policy architecture does a great deal to ensure a high degree of social solidarity, equity, and citizen autonomy. A characteristic of social democratic states is that most programs are publicly provided, and thus minimise reliance on the family and the market – unlike liberal regimes, which maximise family and private market reliance. Social services in social democratic regimes are free or very low cost, are of high quality, and are provided by trained and qualified staff. In the social democratic model, governments do a great deal to promote gender equality and to share caregiving between women and men. In these countries, childcare is seen as a child and a family right.

The third model, the 'conservative' regime, is different yet again. Exemplified by Germany, this model is based on subsidiarity and decentralisation, and relies on social insurance schemes. Conservative social policy programs are distributed on the basis of employment, and thus have the effect of creating a high degree of social stratification. Conservative policy regimes strongly encourage a male breadwinner/female caregiver family model, and in this schema, childcare services are not well developed.

It may seem abstract and academic to notice that western countries fall into one of three camps when it comes to social policy. But there are some practical consequences to this policy overview: it means that the ways that countries organise their childcare systems is linked to other political and social priorities. It further shows that social policy is very open: it is not 'natural' or inevitable to think that children are their parents' personal responsibility; that for-profit operators should provide ECE services; or that governments cannot be persuaded to make different choices.

Making a social policy difference

In Manitoba, early childhood educators, allies and advocates were frustrated by their social policy architecture. Canada has 10 provinces and three territories, and each of these jurisdictions has its own childcare policy. While each province and territory is generally united by the 'liberal' characteristics, family policy in the French-speaking province of Québec is very much like the Nordic social democratic countries. By contrast, Manitoba was seen as Canada's best English-speaking province when it came to childcare.

In 2013, when the campaign began, Manitoba had 187,400 children aged 12 and under (Friendly, *et al.*, 2012). Manitoba mothers worked in the labour force in high numbers. Two of every three mothers of a child under the age of two years old were in the labour market. By the time their youngest children were in school, 17 out of 20 mothers worked. Yet the province had just 30,614 licensed centres and regulated family home spaces for these children – a coverage rate of just 16.3 per cent. Just less than one-third of children received a partial fee subsidy, and the rest paid full fees.

In Canada, 20.5 per cent of Canadian children had access to a regulated childcare space, compared to Manitoba's 16.3 per cent. But Manitoba's fees were the second lowest in the country – less than half the cost of Toronto or Vancouver, for example. Parent fees could be so low because the province of Manitoba provided significant direct funding to programs. Moreover, Manitoba's regulations on staff training and group ratios were considered strong. A full 95 per cent of Manitoba's centres were not-for-profit. The small supply of commercial centres was a further strength, especially since 30 per cent of all of Canada's spaces were for-profit.

Despite Manitoba's position as a 'leader' in Canada, the honour did not mean that children and parents had the access or quality they needed. Plenty of families found the fees too high, and discovered sadly that eligibility for fee subsidies was too restrictive. There weren't enough spaces for families that needed access, and quality was not always high. Early childhood educators were rightfully frustrated with low wages and poor benefits.

In 2013, when the campaign began, the left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) had been in power in Manitoba since 1999. Different NDP ministers of Family Services had introduced piecemeal changes and improvements to the childcare 'system', but none had directly tackled the underlying policy architecture. The community campaign identified the policy system itself as the key target.

On 29th October, 2013, the province's two major childcare organisations released an Open Letter, and launched a website (http://manitobachildcarecampaign.ca/). The Open Letter urged the government to "to fix a core weakness of Manitoba's policy architecture for children: the divide between the early learning and child care system and the public education system." The Open Letter was initiated by the Manitoba Child Care Association (the provincial ECE organisation) and the Child Care Coalition of Manitoba (a multi-stakeholder advocacy group), and was endorsed by many organisations and individuals.

The campaign asked the province to establish a Commission on Integrated Early Learning and Child Care for Manitoba. Campaigners argued that Manitoba needed a "redesigned early learning and child care system." The campaign argued that what was needed was an "integrated public system of early learning and child care (ELCC), drawing on the international best practices identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The OECD's eight best practices for childcare are:

- A systematic and integrated approach to early learning and child care policy
- A strong and equal partnership with 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
- Appropriate training and working conditions for staff
- Systematic attention to data collection and monitoring
- A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation (OECD, 2006).

Campaigners developed a metaphor to explain the crisis – they drew on the history of education to explain why childcare needed modernising: "Manitoba's early learning and child care system was established 40 years ago as a voluntary sector service. As a result, today childcare centres and family childcare homes operate as individual and disconnected stand-alone programs, reliant on community volunteers. The approach to childcare is much like the situation of education before1890, when the *Public Schools Act* turned a ragtag collection of one-room schoolhouses into a provincial system of tax-supported public schools for all children."

A flurry of activity followed. Advocates and campaigners promoted the call, and urged people to sign onto the Open Letter. By early 2014, hundreds of individuals and several dozen organisations had supported the campaign. In the spring of 2014, Family Services Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross released her new plan for childcare, and one of its elements was a childcare commission. The campaign had succeeded.

In late 2014, two eminent Canadian childcare experts – Kathleen Flanagan and Jane Beach – were appointed to head the Commission. An Advisory Group was established and the two campaign founders had seats on the board. In January 2016, the Commission's final report and recommendations were published (Flanagan and Beach, 2016). In response, the Province of Manitoba released what it called a "road map toward creating universally accessible child care", promising to "take the next steps" (Government of Manitoba, 2016). The government was poised to accept most of the Commission's recommendations.

Manitoba's Commission on Early Learning and Child Care

Childcare advocates were successful in creating a Commission on Early Learning and Child Care, which produced ambitious policy recommendations.

In important ways, campaigners were asking Manitoba's 'liberal' architecture to become more 'social democratic.' On the question of access, for example, campaigners wanted services to be universally accessible. Remarkably, the province of Manitoba agreed. The Premier of the Province, Greg Selinger, had gone on record in 2014 in front of hundreds of childcare advocates at Canada's third national childcare conference with his support for universal childcare. When the Commission's final report was released, he reiterated his government's support for this principle. Manitoba is the only Canadian province to have made a commitment to universal childcare.

A second demand of Commission campaigners was for an integrated system of care and learning, bypassing the liberal split that results in generous, well funded and high quality education in one silo, and less developed, poorer quality and badly resourced childcare services in another silo. On this front, campaigners were not successful. Although the province agreed to a Commission, they altered its name and mandate. The province did not launch a commission on 'integrated early learning and care'; the Commissioner's only recommendation related to this

was that care for school-aged children be moved into the school system. This was a considerable dilution of the idea of an integrated system.

Perhaps most importantly, campaigners did not win public management and delivery of services. In Manitoba, 95 per cent of childcare centre spaces are provided by civil society organisations – primarily not-for-profit parent groups, which own and operate childcare programs. In a province of over one million people, with a land mass of 650,000,000 hectares, and over 600 publicly owned and operated elementary schools, there is not one single publicly owned and operated childcare program. Commission campaigners had been clear that it was time to move beyond relying on parent volunteers to start up and operate childcare programs.

The Commission's final report did call for a new management structure for childcare programs: something it called Children's Councils. This was a proposal to begin to move, very tentatively, beyond reliance on the voluntary sector to deliver a vitally needed service. But this aspect of the Commission received the least publicity and public comment.

What next?

Barely three months after the Commission report was released, Manitobans went to the polls and elected a new government. It is unclear what the new Progressive Conservative government will do with the Commission's report and its recommendations.

But the Commission's findings and recommendations have garnered too much interest and attention to languish completely. The Child Care Coalition of Manitoba and the Manitoba Child Care Association hope to be collaborating shortly under the support of a national three-year Status of Women grant – and the organisations will be working together to promote the Commission's report and its findings.

Explaining Canada's success and lessons for Australia

Occasionally, childcare advocates and their allies have success in shifting the childcare conversation. When are their campaigns successful and what factors explain why some campaigns work while others fail?

The Manitoba campaign for a childcare commission proposed 'upstream' policy recommendations and big-picture thinking. Rather than tinker with the details of a liberal childcare model, the campaign asked government to redesign the overall policy architecture. Campaigners drew on international lessons and policy best practices. They brought together researchers, practitioners, educators, trainers, parents, trade unionists, feminists and allies. By using the OECD's eight recommendations, the call was grounded in good research.

The environment was favourable. The long-term presence of a left-wing provincial government provided an opening for campaigners – what social scientists call a "window of political opportunity." Many different actors joined the campaign and supported the call, building a broad base.

Cumulatively, the *content of the demand* and the *composition of the campaign* led to a new collaboration regarding Manitoba's childcare policy architecture. In bringing together actors and players who usually toil in different domains, it created synergy. Most importantly, the campaign focused on the *structure* of childcare policy, rather than the smaller details that so often consume practitioners on a daily basis.

Australia, Canada, and other liberal countries have split systems of care and education. In such countries, we rarely look to the public sector to deliver childcare services, although we count on the state for public education. In the liberal welfare states, private commercial operators supply a large share of childcare spaces, and we ask overworked volunteers in the not-for-profit sector to supply the rest. The policy architecture itself generates the crisis of scarce spaces, high fees, and too much questionable quality. A new policy architecture is required to solve this crisis.

The ECE community – as well as decision-makers, and the general public – must understand that upstream policy change is required. This is a hard sell when the day-to-day details of the current system pose so many challenges. It sometimes seems more important to 'pull the children out of the river' than to run to the top of the waterfall to understand why so many children are at risk. But if we never address the 'upstream' problems, Canadians and Australians will leave the liberal policy architecture unchanged.

* This article is an abbreviated version of a keynote address to be delivered at the ACEL childcare conference, *Leading in the Early Years in a New Era*, 28–29th July, 2016 in Brisbane.

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