



OECD Thematic Review of Canadian Early Childhood Education and Care: Highlights from the recommendations

This BRIEFing NOTE highlights recommendations from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Thematic Review of Canadian ECEC: Canada Country Note* which is available online at www.sdc.gc.ca/en/home.shtml or www.childcarecanada.org. The highlights below includes paragraph numbers in the *Country Note*.

“...it is clear that national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately and coverage is low compared to other OECD countries. Over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn” (Executive Summary).

“We...propose some recommendations to stimulate discussion among governments, policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders involved in ECEC in Canada. This, we believe, is a first task, both at federal and provincial level: to sit down together to conceptualise a coherent, long-term vision for each province and the country as a whole, based on the best available evidence and prioritised into defined steps and time frames. The OECD team will be well satisfied if its conclusions can provide an impetus for that reflection”(148).

Upstream policy recommendations

1. Strengthen the present Federal/Provincial/ Territorial agreements and focus them as much as possible on child development and early learning

“... we encourage the Canadian government to consider funding a publicly managed service for Canadian children from 1-6 years, focused on the development of young children, which is capable also of fulfilling a significant role with respect to child health, parenting and family engagement in education. A policy in favour of the development of young Canadian children should be seen as the

cornerstone of family policy. A universal early childhood education and care system can support in effect, not only the development and education of the children but also their families, and provide a model of good parenting and interaction with young children. If conceived in sufficiently broad terms, the expanded early childhood centre can act also as a powerful instrument to counter the effects of child poverty” (152).

2. Encourage provincial governments to develop, with the major stakeholder groups, an early childhood strategy with priority targets, benchmarks and timelines, and with guaranteed budgets to fund appropriate governance and expansion

“... we encourage all provinces ... to develop a *Provincial Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*, rolled over on a three-year basis, with clearly spelt out goals, targets, time-lines, responsibilities and accountability measures from co-operating ministries and federal bodies. While universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets and specific funding for the important subsystems, such as disadvantaged children, Aboriginal children, and children with special needs. The plan should also aim to bring provincial regulations and pedagogical regimes into line with current knowledge. Criteria for centre performance, such as minimum benchmarks, outcome measures, training levels and the like could also be included so that parents can be assured that services are properly resourced and monitored. We encourage in so far as appropriate, decentralisation of management to the local level, e.g. toward publicly mandated, community or municipal agencies which would have combined responsibility for both kindergarten and child care development. In parallel, reinforcement of management at administration levels will be needed to take on the basic system responsibilities such as, consensus building, regular data collection and analysis, long-term planning, financial steering, standard setting and supportive evaluation” (153).

“Early childhood policy development in Canada is ably supported by a vibrant research community and stakeholder constituency. It seemed to the review team that the consultation of such groups should be given an obligatory and legal status in development planning at provincial level” (154).

3. Build bridges between child care and kindergarten education, with the aim of integrating ECEC both at ground level and at policy and management levels

“... The aim is to conceptualise and deliver care and education as one seamless program to young children... In the view of the OECD review team, greater integration of kindergarten and child care would bring real advantages in the Canadian context” (158).

“At the provincial level, a single department responsible for all young children could interface more effectively with federal initiatives. Planning and contact with local centres could also become more effective and less expensive, as, in an integrated system, there is no longer need for separate planning functions. In addition, the monitoring and evaluation of critical elements can be more efficiently undertaken from a single department with its own pedagogical advisors” (159).

“At federal level, an expert secretariat responsible for young children could develop a general policy framework for the whole country and encourage the even development of early childhood systems across Canada, in which parents in every province can expect roughly equivalent rights and services. A federal secretariat could support on a regular basis the work of the provinces in early education and care, build bridges between certification and training regimes across the country, develop pan-Canadian standards and encourage common data collection. A dedicated federal department could also take the lead in the field of research and public information” (159).

“To shape a universal ECEC service, it is necessary to reach critical mass at administrative level, that is, to have a sufficient number of expert administrators to plan and implement an integrated, efficient system” (160).

Funding and financing recommendations

1. Substantially increase public funding of services for young children

“There has been no significant expansion of the system in Canada over the past decade. Less than 20% of children aged 0-6 years find a place in a regulated service compared to, for example, Belgium 63%; Denmark 78%; France 69%; Portugal 40%; UK 60%... 8%; France 69%; Portugal 40%; UK 60%...”

- Long waiting lists exist in community services...
- A general stagnation in quality across the board has been reported
- Low public expenditure rates per child in child care
- A market-determined fee structure (except Manitoba and Quebec), resulting in high parental contributions to child care costs
- An inefficient subsidy system with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria

- Generalised under-funding in the child care sector with respect to wages, learning materials and infrastructure both physical (premises, outdoor spaces) and non-physical (the infrastructure of planning, administration, training, monitoring, evaluation, data collection...)” (161).

“Even in those provinces/territories that are keen to develop their ECEC systems, services are underfunded, and neither the quality nor the quantity of provision meets the aspirations of parents and professionals” (162).

“Only the regular funding that state investment brings is able to guarantee access and quality on a fairly equitable basis for all groups. A combined Federal/Provincial investment approach to this situation seems to be necessary to plan incremental increases of budget for young children over the next decades” (162).

2. Ensure the creation of a transparent and accountable funding system, and for parents, a fairer sharing of ECEC funding.

“Many stakeholders in Canada drew the attention of the OECD team to financial issues. Among the challenges raised were:

- *Greater transparency in government accounting with regard to child care.*

We did observe that despite the Agreements little net expansion in services has occurred in several provinces. In addition, weak quality continues to exist, and even in some instances, an erosion of community services had taken place. A more effective means of guaranteeing that expenditure adheres to the spirit of the Agreements may need to be legislated.

- *A more equitable share for young children of available public subventions*

There would also seem to be room for a readjustment of education budgets in favour of the foundation stage of lifelong learning, not to mention of health, social and other budgets where expenditure could be decreased by a universal child service which ensured the health and well-being of young children.

...the OECD team proposes for consideration a more equitable 40:40:20 sharing of children’s services. In this division of funding, federal and provincial governments would provide at least 40% each, with a maximal overall contribution from parents of 20%” (169).

3. Given the present patterns of provision in Canada, devise an efficient means of funding a universal early childhood service for children from 1 to 6 years, delivered equitably by mixed providers, governed by public mandated agencies.

“...A change in grant funding may also be envisaged, with a move away from personal subsidy mechanisms toward operational funding and an entitlement for children, as in the traditional education model. Earmarked operational grant funding seems to be a surer means of ensuring more highly qualified personnel and enriched learning environments in the centres – both of which are strong indicators of quality and learning” (170).

“One means of providing a universal service – and one which seems to have the favour of Canadian parents would be to develop the present school based, kindergarten service” (171).

“A real strength in Canadian ECEC is the existence of community networks, and the vitality of the non-profit sector... the review team would suggest that in any mixed provision scenario, safeguards to protect the position of non-profits and small local providers should be built into any new configuration of services” (173).

“A protective mechanism used in other countries is to provide public money only to public and non-profit services, and then to ensure financial transparency in these services through forming strong parent management boards” (173).

Recommendations with regard to access

1. Continue efforts to expand access while promoting greater equity

“[This] weakness in provision has equity implications. Firstly, the development of many vulnerable young Canadian children remains unsupported, and secondly, choice and equality of opportunity for certain groups of women in Canada – especially at the lower end of the social scale – is substantially diminished. Even the moderate-income families find themselves at a disadvantage, as with insufficient services, costs to parents rise” (174).

“We encourage efforts to bring overall Canadian access and expenditure up to the OECD levels. Apart from Quebec, participation rates for children 3-6 years do not reach a quarter of those of the main European countries, and expenditure on early childhood programmes for this age group comes to just 0.2% of GDP, that is, about half of the OECD average” (175).

2. In so far as possible, include children with special educational needs in public early development/education service

“...it can be extremely difficult for parents to obtain appropriate child care for children with disabilities, since staff lack training, buildings are not adapted, and funding is lacking. However, when sufficient human and material resources are made available, the public, universal service offers a continuity of provision that many targeted services, however excellent, are unable to provide” (176).

3. Reinforce policies to support and include Aboriginal children

- “We suggest that partnerships between the Provinces and the First Nation leaders in the cities should also be envisaged, so as to provide a more effective approach to opening education and employment opportunities to Aboriginal children and families living in urban areas. Within such an initiative, networks of administrators, civil society experts and First Nation groups could be created at different levels to resolve concrete challenges” (178).
- “We encourage governments to draw also on expertise and experience in other countries with significant First Nation populations, most notably Finland, Norway and New Zealand” (178).

Recommendations to improve quality

1. Develop a national quality framework for early childhood services across all sectors, and the infrastructure at provincial level to ensure effective implementation

“A key contributor to quality in many countries is the formulation of a *national quality framework document* [which] may include: a statement of the values and goals that should guide early childhood centres; a summary of program standards, that is, ..child/staff ratios, teacher qualifications... third, an outline of the knowledge, skills, dispositions and values that children at different ages can be expected to master across broad developmental areas; and fourth, pedagogical guidelines outlining the processes through which children achieve these goals, and how educators should support them. It would focus on broad national aims, and on children’s holistic development and well-being, rather than on detailed curricular objectives” (182)

“A core curriculum for Canada could reflect more clearly Aboriginal/Canadian heritage. It could also pay more attention to children’s physical health and development (nutrition, exercise, taste for the outdoors, etc), and further stimulate children’s autonomy and creativity. In the case of vulnerable children, special attention would be given to socio-emotional screening and development” (183).

“A broad pedagogical guideline should be further detailed and developed at provincial/territorial level, and finally, be translated by staff and parents into detailed professional learning and care programs at the level of each centre. At this level, curriculum is able to incorporate local concerns, languages and traditions, in line with the broad vision set out in the national or provincial framework. Professionals at local level must be able to count on the support of provincial advisors to support their efforts to develop a curriculum, to access training that helps them to deliver it correctly, and to evaluate their own and the children’s performance” (184).

2. Link accreditation of services to structural requirements and the achievement of quality targets

“Experience from other OECD countries suggests that improving quality in programme settings is a long-term project. Among the more important quality indicators to ensure are:

- *Adequate and regular funding of services*
- *Basic structural requirements*
- *High quality management” (187).*

3. Review ECEC professional profiles, improve recruitment levels and strengthen the initial and inservice training of staff

“Research shows strong links between training/staff support and the quality of ECEC services and the long-term wisdom of retaining qualified staff. Experienced staff have a major impact on children’s well-being and learning achievement. In well-run centres, they will have an individual plan and portfolio for every child, and provide to parents regular feedback on their child’s progress. Regular discussion, team-planning, auto-evaluation and in-service training are features of staff life in a quality center” (189).

4. Provide publicly-funded, high quality interventions in all disadvantaged areas

“...Interventions toward disadvantaged groups need greater funding and are more effective when:

- Early learning programs take place within a general framework of anti-poverty and community development policies;
- Programs are multi-functional and engage communities as well as children: that is, programmes are strong on family engagement and support as well as providing high quality learning experiences to the children;
- Programming for children is intensive: research indicates that the effectiveness of programmes for young children is enhanced by intensity and year-long duration.
- Programs are pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals” (191).

5. Provide attractive indoor and outdoor learning environments

“An important indicator of quality is the level of investment in and the appropriateness of early childhood buildings and learning environments. From the perspective of the review team, design standards for child care premises in Canada seemed poor, partly a reflection of many makeshift arrangements in low-rent buildings. In addition, materials and resources were often conventional and of doubtful learning quality “ (192).

“Where outdoor space is concerned, the quality of the yards attached to centres is often poor in Canada, a country with much land space available. Managers of centres where children spend long hours need

to take account of basic developmental needs. Children need space to move, to physically express themselves and to take part in an active exploratory curriculum. Moreover, given current concerns about child health and obesity, it seems fitting to build opportunities for vigorous exercise into the curriculum” (194). “Young children learn through discovery and self-initiated activities, and their learning is multiplied through active involvement -- hands-on manipulation, sensory engagement, and self-initiated explorations. Natural elements provide for open-ended play and creative exploration with diverse materials” (197).

6. Co-ordinate Canadian research and through funding, orient it further toward important policy issues

“Given the potential importance of research in the coming years for Canadian ECEC, we propose for consideration:

- Initiation of a regular policy review and research cycle for early childhood education and care in the provinces and across Canada, bringing together governments, national research institutes and university early childhood research departments;
- Further enhancing public accountability mechanisms through rigorous and comparative data collection, such as the annual reports and data collection required for participation in the Multilateral Framework. ...According to several researchers, it would be helpful if early childhood data collection and analysis at provincial level were properly supported and supervised by Statistics Canada or other expert body;
- Encouraging independent evaluations of large programs, e.g. of Aboriginal Head Start, urban Aboriginal or community services within a region or large city, with the intention both of raising standards and forming staff;
- Promoting the publication of an annual review of policy and data on ECEC in each province and at national level” (199).

Conclusion

“This *Country Note for Canada* represents the views of the OECD team on [key] issues. The funding issue is addressed throughout the report as we consider that this is the critical issue in Canada where affordability of services, access and quality are concerned. We have also picked up on numerous examples of good practice in Canada, but note that the time seems ripe for a more dynamic and organized approach to early childhood services, especially from the side of the public authorities...Although structures are in some instances looser than in other federal countries that we have visited, yet a great deal of fruitful co-operation is taking place. Our *Upstream policy recommendations* at the beginning of this chapter underline our appreciation of the multilateral initiatives, while suggesting for the provinces a more active public responsibility for all early childhood services from 1-6 years. We have also put forward for consideration no fewer than six recommendations to improve the quality of services proposed to Canadian children and families” (202).

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