

Looking Beyond Our Borders

THE VALUE OF COMPARATIVE DATA

The value of using comparative information in early childhood education and care is well described in the introduction to a series of studies commissioned by the UK's Department for Education and Skills:

There are at least three ways in which cross-national work can be useful: provoking critical thinking; opening up choices; and for policy learning and innovation (Moss, Petrie, Cameron, Candappa, McQuail and Mooney, 2003:5).

Since the 1990s, more and more comparative data and analysis have become available so that it is now possible to place Canadian early childhood education and child care (ECEC) in an international context and to derive valuable lessons, insights and best practices from outside our own borders.

CURRENT SOURCES OF INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS IN ECEC

There are several main sources of international data and analysis¹ that shed light on ECEC in Canada. Beginning in the mid 1980s, the 10 year project conducted by the European Commission (EC) Childcare Network from 1985 to 1995 provided the first comprehensive, comparative body of knowledge about ECEC as well as a set of common program and policy targets. The second, and the most systematic and extensive source of comparison and policy learning is the 20 nation Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) between 1998 and 2006. Canada is a member of the OECD and took part in this study so actual comparative data is available. A third source of information used for comparison is the voluminous early childhood and child care research from the United States that is published in academic journals and reports. Although this is not set up as comparative research, it provides data

on specific topics and allows some comparisons between Canada and other countries as well as insights into policy and practice “dos and don'ts”. A fourth kind of material that is useful for international comparison is non-research-based documentation and description about policy and practice in other countries such as, for example, Australia or New Zealand. And a final source of useful comparative ECEC information comes from several United Nations agencies, particularly the 2006 UNESCO Global Monitoring Report for Education for All, *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Education and Care*, and the upcoming report on early childhood education and care from UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre expected in 2007.

LEARNING TO BE, LEARNING TO DO, LEARNING TO LEARN, AND LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER

This section of *ECEC in Canada 2006* uses comparative data from the OECD Thematic Review, the main source of comparative figures describing ECEC in 20 countries, that help situate Canada's ECEC internationally.

The 50 reports that make up the OECD's Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care comprise the largest body of comparative analytic literature to date in the field. They provide an opportunity not only to compare how well countries are “doing” using common criteria but also offer a unique opportunity to draw conclusions about best practices in ECEC policy and practice. The Thematic Review's final comparative report, *Starting Strong II* (2006) concluded with the idea that children's rights and well-being are fundamental and that “*Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together*” should be considered to be critical elements in the journey of each child toward human and social development.

¹ Websites for some of these sources are found at the end of this section.

The final OECD report identified the comprehensive study's key trends and conclusions:

- A growing consensus – based on research from a wide range of countries covering demographics, social change and cost-benefit analyses – that governments must invest in and regulate early childhood education and care;
- A trend towards integrating early childhood policy and administration under one ministry, often education;
- Moves towards greater contact between early childhood centres and schools, and growing use of national curricular frameworks in the early childhood sector;
- The provision of at least two years of kindergarten before children enter compulsory schooling;
- Growing, but still insufficient, government investment in services;
- More participatory approaches to quality improvement, based on wide consultation of stakeholders and the engagement of professional staff in documentation and research;
- Clearer ideas at government level of the qualifications needed by staff to engage with rapidly changing social and family conditions;
- An increase in university chairs in early childhood education and care policy;
- A recognition of the need for more country research and data collection in the field.

The report also examined progress made in the 20 countries reviewed up to 2006. A summary of the key data shows:

RE: ACCESS/COVERAGE

- *For under-threes*: Coverage for this age group is limited in most countries with considerable variability of provision. Access is highest in Denmark and Sweden. Under-threes have a legal right to attend free school-based ECEC in Belgium.
- *For threes and up*: Coverage for threes and up is high in most countries; close to 100% of three year olds are in regulated ECEC programs in Italy, France, and Belgium. In Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the U.K., coverage is more than 50% at age three; called “negligible” in Canada, Greece, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey. Most European countries provide all children with at least

two years of free, publicly-funded provision before they begin primary school.

- *Disadvantaged children*: In some countries, a significant percentage of young children live in poverty. In the U.S., only 45% of 3-5 years olds from low income groups have access to ECEC programs compared to 75 % from high income groups. In Canada, only 20% of lone parents and 5% of disadvantaged groups are covered. In some countries, virtually all low income 3 year olds have access.
- *Children with special needs*: Provision is generally poor.

RE: FUNDING (EXPENDITURES)

- Public spending for ECEC ranges between 0.25% to 2% of GDP for 0-6 years. Canada is the lowest spender, 14th out of 14 countries for which these data are provided, followed by Australia and the Netherlands. Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland are highest while the U.S. ranks 9th of the 14 countries.
- In European countries, 25-30% of costs are paid by parents. Costs are higher in those that rely for provision on the private sector.

RE: QUALITY

- Younger children and – in some countries – children from poor families are especially likely to be in poor pedagogical settings with low standards.
- Quality for all ages is very variable among countries. Staff in programs operated as part of the social welfare sector (as opposed to the education sector) have low status and training, especially in family day care.
- In a number of countries including Canada, a majority of children under three years are cared for by unregulated providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE THEMATIC REVIEW

In concluding the eight year Thematic Review, ten recommendations were made for “consideration by government policy makers and ECEC stakeholders”, urging them:

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development [by organizing services to support parents in child rearing, provide opportunity for women to work, and help include low income and immigrant families in the community and society];

2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies;
3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance;
4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services;
5. To base public funding estimates on achieving quality pedagogical goals;
6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights;
7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services;
8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff;
9. To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services;
10. To aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy. (OECD, 2006:16-17).

LOOKING BEYOND OUR BORDERS: WHERE CANADA STANDS

Both the Canada Review (2004) and the comparative reports (2001 and 2006) provide valuable analysis that will be useful to Canadians with an interest in early learning and child care. The *Canada Country Note* began with an observation about where Canada fits, noting that

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 (OECD, 2004:6).

The Canada report made a series of recommendations including: substantially increased and better focused public spending; a national framework for quality; much wider access with universality as a goal; participation of

parents and experts in quality frameworks; defined action plans by provincial governments; better inclusion of children with special needs; improved access for Aboriginal and disadvantaged children; improved ECEC physical environments; and better data and research.

Detailed comments on Canada's early childhood situation included the following observations:

- Other than Quebec, 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%; U.K. 60%.
- Long waiting lists exist in community services, including in centres serving children with special needs;
- A general stagnation in quality across the board has been reported;
- Public expenditure rates per child in child care are low. Public child care expenditure for children 0-12 years averaged \$386 per child, and \$3,200 per child care place compared to \$6,120 per child in kindergarten and almost \$15,000 per student at university;
- A market-determined fee structure (except in Manitoba and Quebec), resulting in high parental contributions to child care costs, ranging from 34% to 82% of costs. The average across the country, excluding Quebec, is just under 50% of costs compared to a maximum 15% parental contribution in Finland or approximately 25% across Europe;
- An inefficient subsidy system with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria, accessed by only 22% of lone parents and around 5% of married mothers from low-income families;
- Generalized under-funding in the child care sector with respect to wages, learning environments and infrastructure both physical (premises, outdoor spaces) and non-physical (infrastructure of planning, administration, training, monitoring, evaluation, data collection). Even in those provinces/territories that are keen to develop their ECEC systems, child care services in particular are under-funded, and frequently, neither the quality nor the quantity of provision meets the aspirations of parents and professionals (OECD, 2004:8).

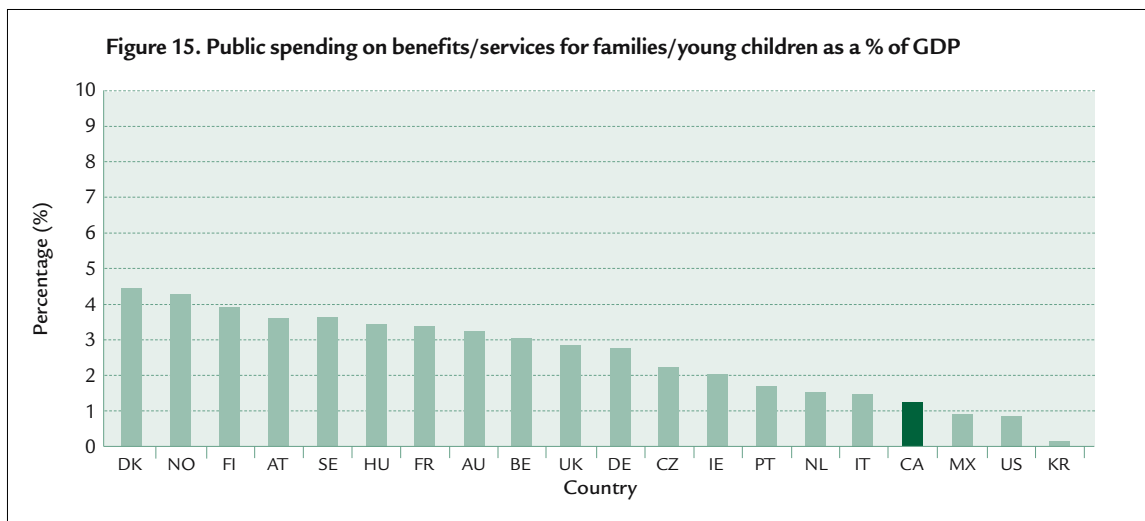
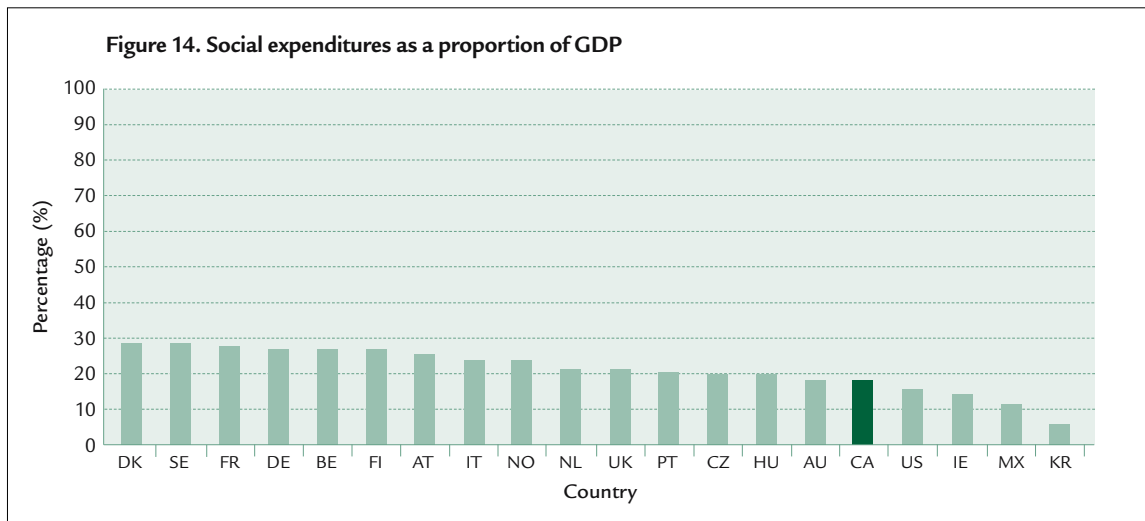
In addition to these comments on Canada from the OECD, there are useful cross-national data that provide

support for these comments and the OECD’s recommendations for Canada. Data drawn from *Starting Strong II* can shed further light on the question “How does Canada

measure up?” and to provide opportunities for policy learning and innovation for Canada.

■ USING THE COMPARATIVE DATA² TO SHOW WHERE CANADA STANDS

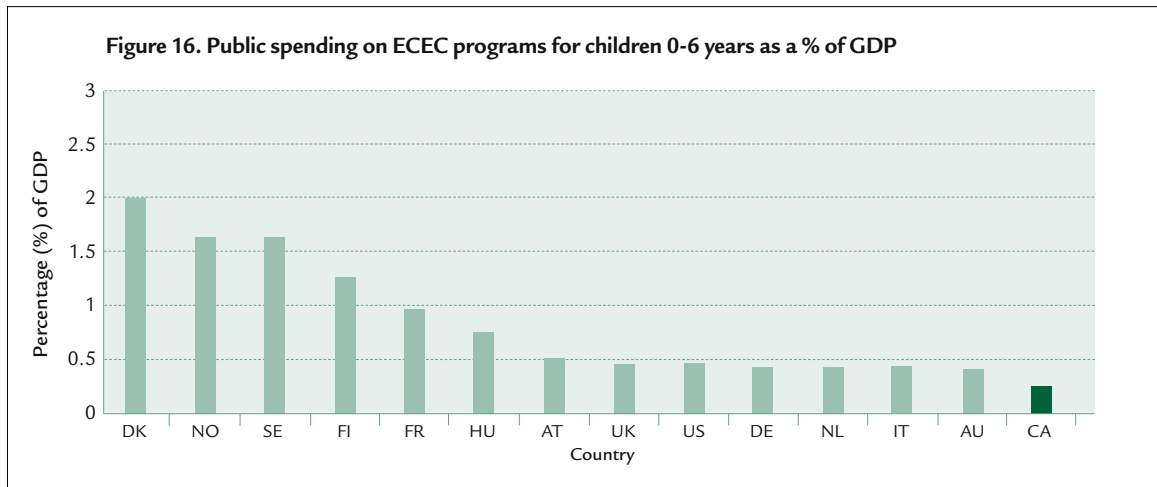
CANADA’S SOCIAL SPENDING AND SPENDING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ARE LOW.



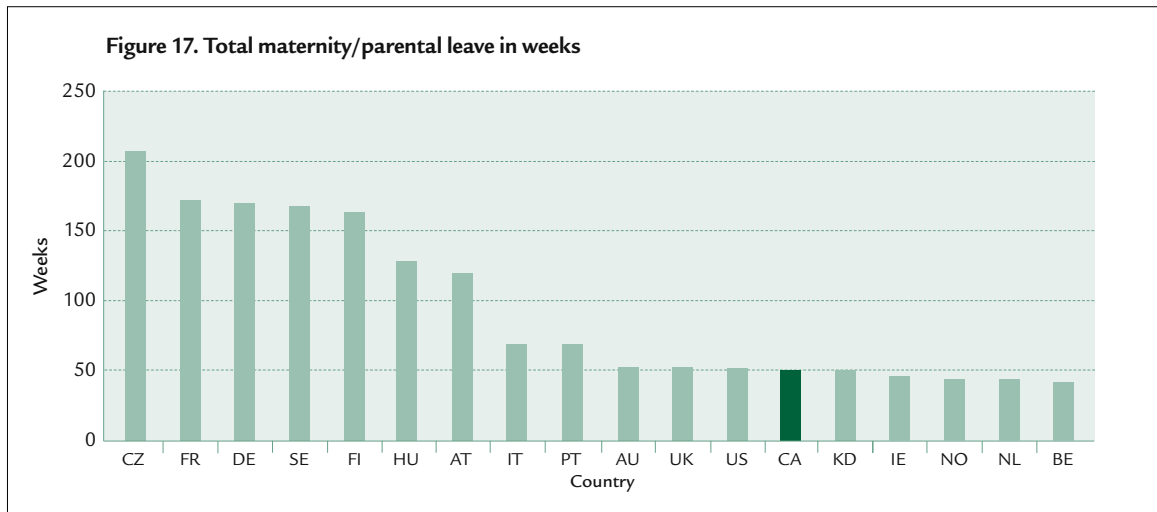
Note: Country abbreviations used in the figures:

AT=Austria, AU=Australia, BE=Belgium, BE-Fl=Belgium (Flanders), BE-Fr=Belgium (French community), CA= Canada, CZ=Czech Republic, DE=Germany, DK=Denmark, FL=Finland, FR=France, HU=Hungary, IE=Ireland, IT=Italy, KR=Republic of Korea, MX=Mexico, NL=Netherlands, NO=Norway, PT=Portugal, SE=Sweden, UK=United Kingdom, US=United States

CANADA'S SPENDING ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IS THE LOWEST AMONG 14 OECD COUNTRIES



CANADA'S MATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE IS OF MODERATE DURATION AND EFFECTIVENESS (DURATION X REIMBURSEMENT FOR LOST WAGES).



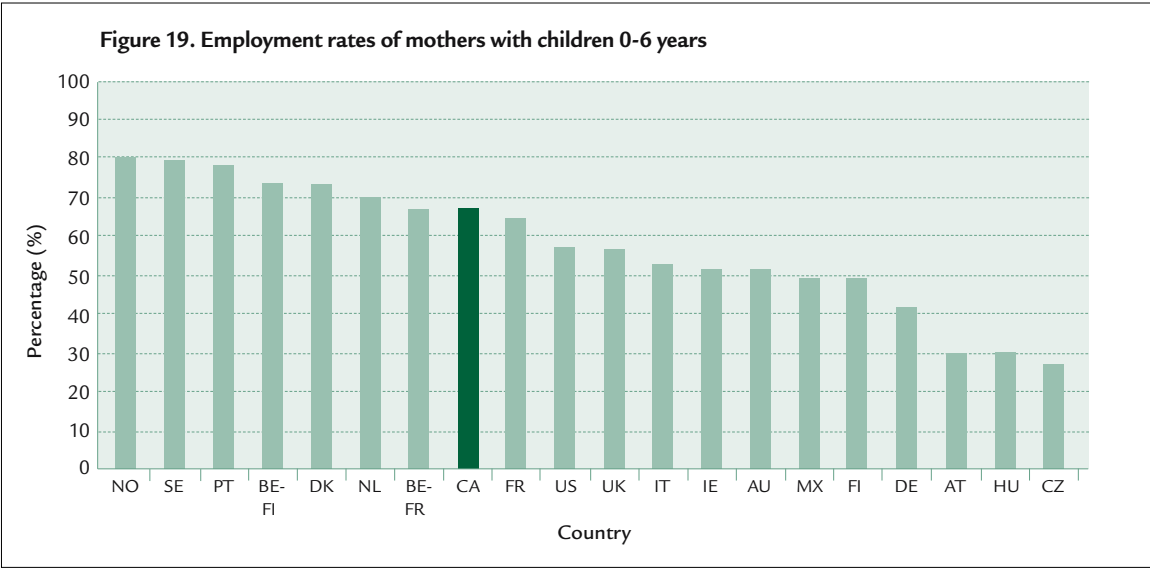
2 These figures were constructed using data from *Starting Strong II* and are reproduced from *Early learning and child care: How does Canada measure up?* International comparisons using data from *Starting Strong II* (Friendly, 2006).

Please note that data may not be entirely consistent vis-a-vis years and what is included.

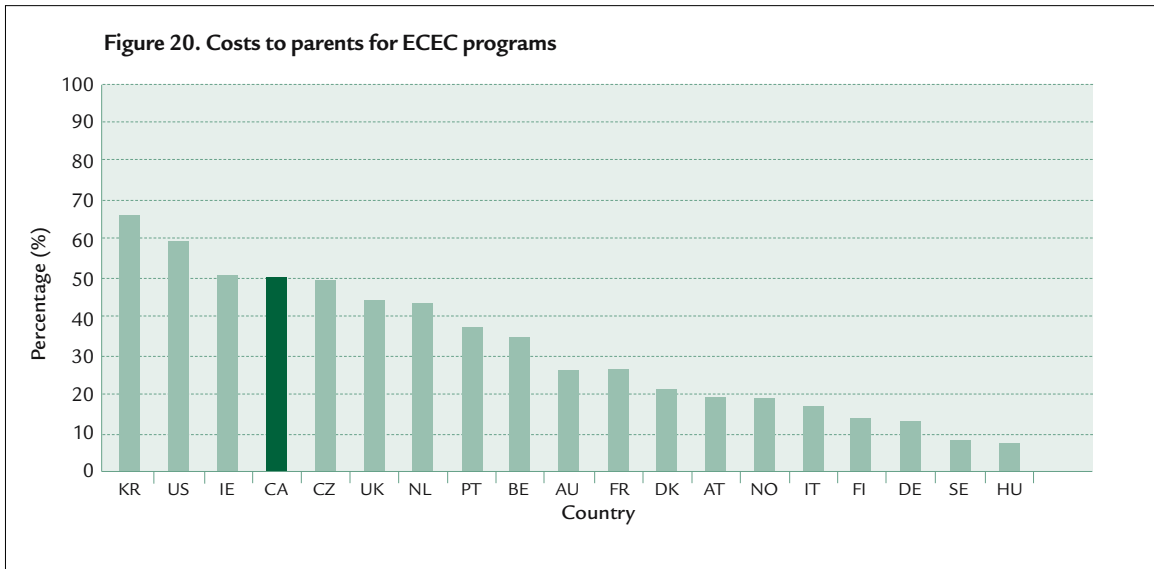


Note: This figure is derived from combining duration of maternity and parental leave, and payment.

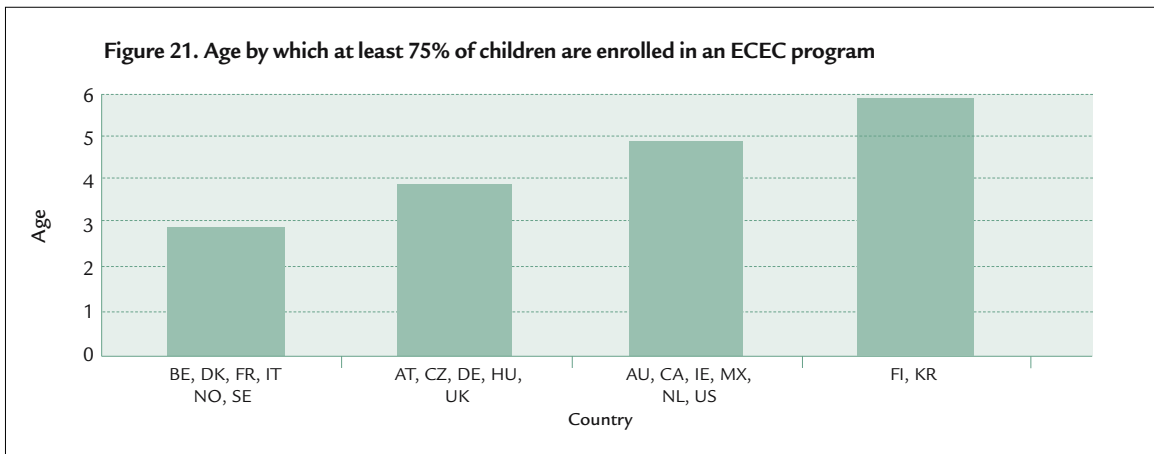
CANADA’S LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE FOR MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN IS FAIRLY HIGH.



THE COST TO PARENTS FOR ECEC PROGRAMS IS AMONG THE HIGHEST.



THE MAJORITY OF OECD COUNTRIES PROVIDE ACCESS TO MOST CHILDREN AT LOWER AGES THAN DOES CANADA



SUMMARY

In some ways, Canada as an early childhood education and child care laggard has an advantage that some other countries do not have; that is, Canada has the advantage of being in a position to examine other countries' experiences, successes and failures.

As Moss et al (2003) point out “cross-national work can provide a lens through which to view our own country. This can make the familiar look strange and make us question assumptions and practices that we take for granted. Comparing ourselves with the situation in other countries raises new questions and helps to avoid the pit-fall of producing solutions before identifying critical questions. It can reveal the particular understandings of childhood, learning, care, work with children and so on, which play a large part in shaping policies, provisions and practices” (p. 6).

REFERENCES

- Friendly, M. (2006). *Early learning and child care: How does Canada measure up? International comparisons using data from Starting Strong II*. BRIEFing NOTE. Toronto, ON: Childcare Resource and Research Unit.
- Moss, P, Petrie, P., Cameron, C., Candappa, M., McQuail, S., & Mooney, A. (2003). *Early years and child care international project: Introduction*. London: UK Government. Department for Education and Skills.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Education Division. (2001). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: Author.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Education Division. (2004). *Canada Country Note*. Paris: Author.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Education Division. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: Author.

WEBSITES

OECD Thematic Review

www.oecd.org/document/3/0,2340,en_2649_34511_27000067_1_1_1_1,00.html

EU papers – CRRU website

www.childcarecanada.org/pubs/other/quality/index.html

UNICEF – Innocenti Centre

www.unicef-icdc.org

Also see the CRRU Issue file on the OECD Thematic Review

www.childcarecanada.org/res/issues/StartingStrong2.htm