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Taking Canada's Child Care Pulse

The state of ECEC in 2015

Introduction

About four years ago, four national child care groups set out to bring the various parts of the Canadian child care movement together to work for objectives that all held in common. One shared concern that united the groups was the “state of...” Canadian early childhood education and child care (ECEC). In an environment with no Canada-wide policy or approach, limited federal funding and intermittent attempts by various provinces/territories to forge their own way in the absence of a coordinated approach, advocates, ECE professionals and other social justice groups feared that the “state of...” child care — never strong in Canada — was in many ways at a low point.

One outcome of the partnership was *ChildCare2020: From vision to action*, Canada's fourth national policy conference. By the time conference planning was underway, the four organizations had shrunk to three as the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council closed after having been stripped of all its federal funding as the other three groups had been several years earlier. Eventually the conference was supported organizationally and financially by a number of labour partners, social policy organizations and early childhood groups.

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At the conference in November 2014, international and Canadian presenters and participants from across Canada debated the main policy options for early childhood education and care. Considerable excitement was generated about possibilities for the future, particularly in light of the federal election expected in the fall of 2015 and the political spotlight already shone on child care by the New Democratic Party's recent election commitment to a universal program. The conference starting points and themes were set out in a background paper, *Childcare in Canada by 2020: A Vision and a Way Forward*, which was endorsed by all 700 or so participants at the conference's end.¹

There was considerable discussion about Canada's long-standing failure to develop the universal, high quality, comprehensive ECEC system called for in the background paper and expanded upon in the various sessions. The conference was united both by a common vision of what child care could become given the right circumstances and the conviction that despite many provincial government and community initiatives, the "state of..." Canadian ECEC was likely to remain far from where it needed to be to support families and children in a wealthy modern country if there continued to be no overarching federal role.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* includes articles on a number of the main policy questions and options debated at ChildCare2020. This article is intended to help provide the context for these by taking Canadian child care's pulse — setting out "the state of..." ECEC in Canada at the present time. It begins with an overview, which — prefaced by a few "did you know's?" — is intended to summarize and set the stage. The overview is followed by a more detailed look at the "state of..." ECEC organized by the three principles that shape the "vision" laid out in the conference background paper — universality, high quality and comprehensiveness. It uses the most consistent, reliable data available at this time — mostly from 2012. More coherent, more developed ECEC data is but one of the policy tools that will need to be put in place as Canada moves toward a national child care program.

Some quick facts and an overview of the “state of”... ECEC in Canada in 2015

Did you know that...?

- A national child care program was first proposed by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970. Although the years since 1970 saw action on most of the Commission’s recommendations, the national child care program is often called part of the “unfinished business” of Canadian feminism.
- In a 2008 25-country study by UNICEF that ranked ECEC access and quality, Canada was tied with Ireland for last place, achieving only one of 10 benchmarks.²
- There were only enough full- or part-time centre-based child care spaces for 22.5% of Canadian children 0-5 years in 2012. While this coverage rate has been creeping up steadily for some years, the dropping birth rate — a trend that has now been reversed — contributed to the increase in coverage.³
- 2009 data from the OECD Family Database shows Canada ranking second last (after Greece) in public spending on ECEC as a proportion of GDP. These data show Canada spending only 0.2% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 0.7%. Since the 1990s, the figure at least 1% of GDP for children 0-5 has been used as the international standard for public spending on ECEC (child care and kindergarten together).⁴
- Kindergarten is normally provided free of charge but parent fees for child care are out of many families’ reach — higher than university costs both for Canada as a whole and in all provinces/territories except Quebec.⁵ Although fee subsidies are provided in almost all provinces/territories, most low and modest income families still cannot afford or find child care.
- The mostly female child care workforce (96%) earns half the national average salary and less than half the salary of kindergarten teachers. Despite their low pay, early childhood educators working in child care centres on average have education levels higher than the national

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average.⁶ Nevertheless, Canadian ECE training requirements are low compared to many other countries and lower than those recommended by research.

The problem is that it's a market, not a system: An overview

It's noteworthy that Canada has never had a national ECEC policy or program. While each province/territory has its own child care and early childhood education policy, provincial/territorial policy and programs are fragmented and incomplete and they are not united by a national approach as is Medicare. Although each jurisdiction provides "spaces" in centres and regulated family child care, public funding and public policy are inadequate to support access and high quality. High quality child care remains limited in supply and financially out of reach for the many (or most) families, especially for those with infants and children with disabilities, Indigenous families, those in rural/remote communities, and families working non-standard hours. Although Canada is a wealthy country — one of the world's wealthiest — comparative studies⁷ show Canada at the bottom of international league tables on ECEC quality and access.

Although there are many ways to explain Canada's failure to develop even a modest national ECEC policy, one key effect of this failure is that Canadian child care follows a market model, which has been shown to be less than optimal. Kindergarten is the sole publicly- and universally-provided ECEC program but although kindergarten is offered by all provinces/territories free of charge, it is primarily only for five year olds.⁸ As well, kindergarten — whether part-day or full-school day — is not designed to meet parents' work schedules. And although in the last decade or so there has been a trend to move child care into education ministries across Canada, kindergarten and child care remain quite separate rather than integrated.

Just about every element of child care follows a market model, taking a consumerist approach rather than developing an integrated public system with long-term goals, coherent planning, public management and a sustained approach to funding. This means that market forces rule — service initiation and maintenance are almost entirely private responsibilities, families are considered to be consumers who — in most of Canada — pay all of, or most of, the cost of child care services

(including unregulated child care) out of their own pockets. Most of the public funding that is available for child care purposes adds to the marketization as it is usually attached to individual families in one way or another, with more program-based, “core” funding much more limited.⁹

There is good evidence that more public management — including program-based, “core” public funding — is not only a much more fair and equitable way to deliver services, but that it is also much more effective.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Canadian government policy at all levels continues to encourage reliance on the market, treating child care as a consumer product, not a public good. What this means for families and children “on the ground” is that the high parent user fees — a consequence of underfunding price regulated child care — place child care out of many families’ reach while programs find it difficult to attract and retain qualified educators. It also means that programs are too often not of a quality that can be considered able to provide solid support for children’s development and well-being. At the same time, underfunding impedes service stability, while significant service gaps encourage development of for-profit child care, sometimes aimed at profitable “niche” markets. And for many parents, unregulated child care is the only affordable and available option although it — by its very “unregulated” nature — operates with no public oversight at all, unless there is a specific complaint or a tragedy.¹¹

For more than 40 years, reports, task forces, experts and parents have called for a national child care program to no avail. After a number of fits and starts throughout the 1980s and 1990s, finally, in 2005 the Liberal federal government began to bring in the first national “early learning and child care” program to move beyond the political commitment stage. Provinces/territories developed public action plans setting out how they would proceed as required by the federal government and began to spend the new multi-year federal funding. However, in February, 2006, a just-elected Conservative government abruptly cancelled the bi-lateral federal/provincial/territorial agreements that were to have been the core of the program, and that was the end of Canada’s first national child care program since World War II.

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Taking the pulse: the “state of…” ECEC in Canada

This section will examine in more detail how ECEC has fared in Canada in the years since 2006. The data it presents are generally organized using the three principles for a national ECEC program set out in the ChildCare2020 background paper: universality, high quality and comprehensiveness

Universal entitlement

This first principle put forward at the ChildCare2020 conference defines universal entitlement:

ECEC is a public good, a human right and part of building the equal, just Canada we value. Young children are citizens in their own right, entitled to a fair share of society’s resources, including appropriate high quality ECEC programs provided as a public good, not a commodity

A key community and government role is to support families in their parenting role. High quality ECEC ... should be accessible for all children regardless of their ability, economic, cultural or linguistic circumstances, where they live in Canada or whether their parents are in or out of the workforce, studying or working non-standard hours. ECEC should be available in the local community or neighbourhood and participation should be voluntary — determined by parents. ECEC should be available at affordable fees or no fee.

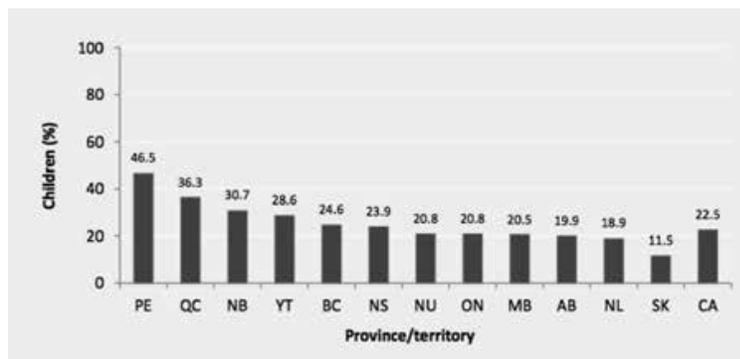
The available data and information tell us that most of Canadian ECEC does not follow this definition of universality at all, even taking into account that achieving a fully universal ECEC system with access for all children whose families choose would be a multi-year process taking as long as a decade to achieve. As noted earlier, the sole cross-Canada ECEC service that can be considered universal from an availability and affordability perspective is kindergarten for five year olds. However, from the perspective of families with infants or 2-3 year olds, kindergarten does not meet the test of appropriateness, as it does not accommodate them. Nor does it provide good support for most working/studying parents, even those working part-time; we do

not have the data that can tell us how many kindergarten (or school-age) children need child care outside school hours while their parents work or study or are otherwise engaged.

We do have data showing child care “coverage” roughly — for how many children is a regulated space available? This, however, does not take into account where they live, their ages, parents’ work hours, culture or language, disability or ability, parents’ preferences and a number of other key important characteristics — the data that can answer these questions aren’t available for most of Canada. Nor do these figures show families’ access from a financial perspective.

Nevertheless, the available data on “coverage” show that growth in regulated child care spaces had slowed to a low point by 2012, when there were full- and part-time (usually referred to as “nursery school” or “preschool”) centre-based child care spaces for only 22.5% of Canadian children 0-5 years. This was a small increase from 21.8% coverage in 2010. Although the coverage rate has been creeping up steadily, there is still a very sizeable gap between need and provision and overall, growth has slowed considerably since 2006 (that is the *rate* of increase has slowed down considerably). Breaking this down by age groups shows that regulated child care centre spaces for 0-5 year olds grew only 0.7% between 2010 and 2012 while all regulated spaces including family child care for 0-12 year olds grew by only 0.6% to 986,842 regulated spaces. This was the lowest in years: even during the limited growth years after 2006, space increases had never dropped below 1%.

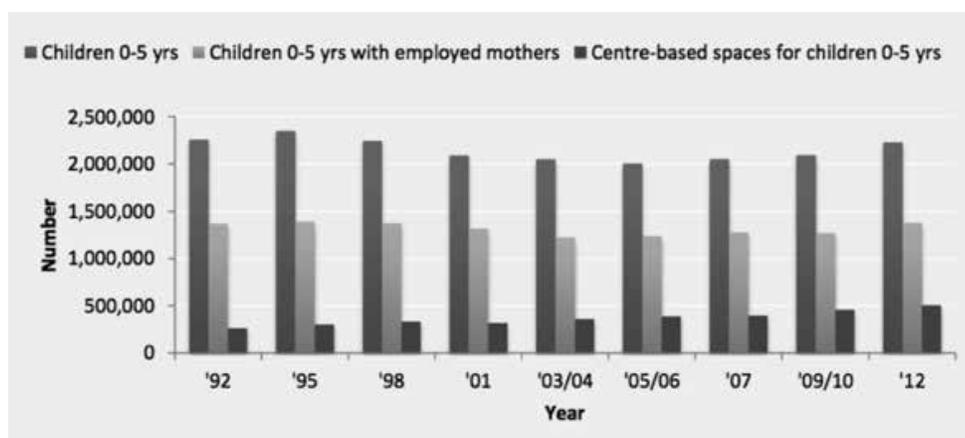
Percent of children 0-5 years for whom there is a regulated centre-based child care space by province/territory – 2012



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The demographics continue to show the need for child care to support parents' (or mothers') employment. In 2012, the labour force participation rate was 69.7% for mothers whose youngest child was 0-2 years, 76.6% for mothers with a youngest child 3-5 years, and 84.0% for those whose youngest child was 6-15 years. These figures have risen quite steadily year after year, up 10% or more in each age category since the mid-1990s. Perhaps the most interesting demographic change, however, is that the birth rate has risen so the number of children has begun growing for the first time in some years: the 0-4 age group grew at the highest rate in 50 years, up 11% since 2006.¹²

Number of children, number of children with employed mothers, and centre-based spaces for children 0-5 years, 1992-2012



Data on child care fees for 2012 and others for 2014 show that the rhetorical statement that parent fees for child care continue to be higher than university costs is true both for Canada as a whole (average) and in almost all provinces/territories. The range of parent fees (in centres for 0-6 year olds) by jurisdiction was enormous, ranging (for an infant) from \$1,824/year in Quebec to more than \$12,000/year in Ontario — almost seven times as much: median monthly parent fees across Canada were \$761 for infant care, \$701 for toddlers and \$674 for preschoolers in 2012 (Quebec's much lower fees are included in the calculations).¹³ At the same time, a 2014 national survey of child care fees of parent fees in Canada's largest cities found that

Parents in Canada's biggest cities pay a vast range of child care fees. Toronto has the highest fees in all three age categories. The cities of Laval, Gatineau, Montreal, Longueuil and Quebec City have the lowest fees across all age categories due to the \$7-affordable cities in Canada when fees are compared to a woman's income. Gatineau is the most affordable with the other Quebec cities close behind.

Higher parent fees can be a reflection of higher wages for better-qualified ECEs and better staff-to-child ratios. They can also be a reflection of less or poorly directed government support. Lower parent fees can mean more government support, but it can also mean lower pay for less-qualified ECEs leading to more staff turnover. The largest determinants of parent fees in a given city are set through provincial policy.¹⁴

With regard to the fee subsidy systems operating in all provinces/territories except Quebec: while all jurisdictions except Quebec subsidize some of the costs of regulated child care for some low/modest income, usually employed, parents, being eligible to be subsidized does not necessarily mean that child care fees are covered. In Ontario, there are many fewer available subsidies than there are eligible parents while in other provinces/territories, the fee subsidy provided often does not cover the fee charged by the centre/provider, so fully subsidized parents may be required to pay out-of-pocket. Thus, it is fair to say, as the OECD review of Canada did in 2004, that Canada's fee subsidy system is outmoded and ineffective.

High quality

The second principle put forward by the ChildCare2020 background paper and debated at the conference defined high quality in the following way, recognizing that there is a significant aspect of cultural and personal determination in what constitutes "quality" in ECEC. That is, there is no single, rigid definition of quality to be applied. Nevertheless, some features of ECEC programs are broadly agreed upon as connected to children's development, well-being, happiness and human rights.

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The importance of quality for child development, wellbeing and happiness cannot be overstated. Policy frameworks and services should follow the best available evidence about what contributes to high quality for children. Frameworks and programs should also incorporate human rights considerations such as full inclusion of children with disabilities and respect for diversity.

High quality ECEC is best assured through a system of linked elements. These elements — ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources (such as good wages and working conditions for staff), physical environment, data/research — should be taken into account as part of an all-encompassing policy framework.

Integrating child care and early childhood education as “strong and equal partners” is desirable from a quality perspective. While there are multiple ways to do this, integration across multiple domains including financing, training, pedagogy, and governance makes the system stronger.

The ChildCare2020 high quality principle is stated broadly, taking a broad, system approach considering the “linked elements” of a system that have been shown to affect quality at the front line or program level as it affects children’s experiences. Two elements of programs closely linked to quality where data are available are human resources (the child care workforce) and governance.

Research shows that the workforce — the staff — is at the centre of any quality equation.¹⁵ Training specific to early childhood education, wages and working conditions all combine to shape quality. The most recent Canadian data (from 2012) show that wages (after adjusting for inflation) for program staff between 1998 (the last time Canada-wide data on child care wages were collected) and 2012 rose in all jurisdictions except Ontario, where they dropped slightly. Child care wages, however, continue to be low; in 2012 the median gross wage for child care program staff was only 69% of the average wage in Canada, with a median salary of \$16.50/hour Canada-wide and a provincial/territorial range from \$1/hour to \$19.13/hour.¹⁶ At the same time, Canadian ECE training requirements are lower than recommended by research, with several provinces/territories still requiring no training and none requiring all staff to have some post-secondary ECE training:

the standard maximum ECE training requirements are almost all below a four-year degree requirement, with a one-year diploma the maximum requirement in some jurisdictions.

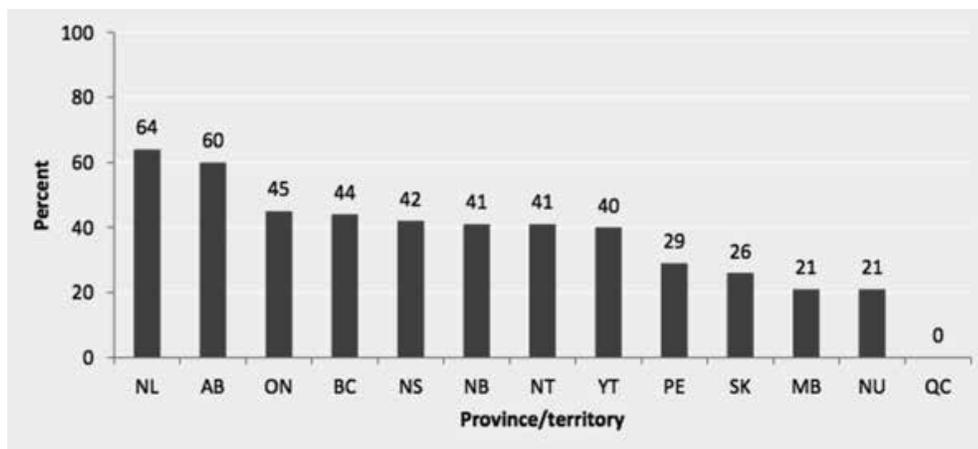
Median gross hourly wages for program staff, provinces/Canada total 1998 (adjusted to 2012 dollars) and 2012

Prov.	1998 (adjusted to 2012 dollar)	2012
	\$	\$
NL	9.39	14.00
PE	10.42	15.00
NS	11.62	12.84
NB	9.42	13.50
QC	13.89	19.13
ON	17.76	17.29
MB	13.28	16.00
SK	14.03	14.92
AB	11.18	15.33
BC	16.20	17.00
CAN	15.36	16.50

Two other key features of quality in ECEC provision fall into the category of “governance” — that is, program auspice or ownership and integration of care and education. There has been a clear trend since 2006 toward an increase in for-profit ownership (which research shows to be well-kinked to poorer quality), including proliferation of chains and corporate-type “big box” child care, with the proportion of spaces in the for-profit sector across Canada up to nearly 30% of total centre spaces, the highest level since 1992.¹⁷ Ironically, since 2006, responsibility for child care has been shifting from social service ministries to education ministries across Canada, with eight jurisdictions having taking this step by 2015. This means that education departments in some jurisdictions now regulate a significant for-profit “education” sector for young children although for-profit education for elementary students is relatively unusual.

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Percent of total allocation to regulated child care that is allocated to parent fee subsidies, by province/territory, 2011/12



Additionally, as noted earlier, however, moving child care into education ministries has not meant a significant move toward the integration of care and education that has become the gold standard in many countries (and considered to be key in a quality system). The “strong and equal partnership” recommended in the comparative literature has not occurred in Canada, leaving child care services remaining as the “poor cousin” in split provincial/territorial systems.¹⁸

Comprehensiveness

This third principle put forward by the ChildCare2020 conference is “comprehensiveness”. This should be taken to mean, first, that the range and variety of ECEC services should provide parents with a range of reasonable options to fit their needs and preferences (that is, “parental choice”), and, second, that a variety of policies and practices required to support children and young families more broadly that just ECEC needs to be addressed by national and provincial/territorial policy.

The ChildCare2020 background paper describes this:

Since families come in all types, shapes and sizes, they should be able to choose from a reasonable variety of flexible, high quality ECEC service options including full- and part-time centres, regulated home child care, emergency/respice/occasional ECEC and parenting support programs.

These should be available at reasonably convenient locations.

Policies and practices to ensure time and resources to help families balance work and family are also required and should include: adequately paid leaves for family responsibilities (flexible maternity, parental and paternity leave); pregnancy, health and parenting supports; flexible working arrangements; living wages; affordable housing; and income security to mitigate poverty.

Regarding the first part: from a broad perspective, Canada does offer a reasonable range of services but rarely in sufficient quantities or in the right places to offer “choice” for most families even if the services were affordable. Overall, community services are fragmented and patchwork, not developed using a planned approach. Looking at the “state of…” ECEC shows access not only to be a problem for families generally but that some groups have more difficulty accessing services because there are no comprehensive community service systems. Particularly affected are families with infants and children with disabilities, francophones outside Quebec, families working non-standard hours and — just about everywhere — Indigenous families seeking services that reflect their own culture. Ferns and Friendly’s 2013 analysis shows the proportion of kinds of services by province/territory to be wildly varied; for example, some jurisdictions offer very little regulated home child care while in others it comprises 25% of the supply. As noted earlier, it is Canada’s unplanned, marketized approach to developing child care services that leaves many communities without anything approaching comprehensive service systems.

The second part of the principle of comprehensiveness is concerned with the broader range of policies and programs needed to support Canada’s families and children. Although this is construed quite broadly to encompass housing, decent work for parents, and income support to alleviate poverty, paid family leave — maternity, parental and paternal — is the family policy most closely associated with child care. In the 2008 UNICEF ECEC report card, one of the 10 benchmarks on which countries were ranked was family leave. The benchmark, which Canada failed to meet, was stated as:

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A minimum entitlement to paid parental leave

The minimum proposed standard is that, on the birth of a child, one parent be entitled to leave of at least a year (to include pre-natal leave) at 50 per cent of salary (subject to upper and lower limits). For parents who are unemployed or self-employed, the income entitlement should not be less than the minimum wage or the level of social assistance. At least two week parental leave should be specifically reserved for fathers.

UNICEF's 2008 report points out that the average duration of leaves for the countries in its study was approaching one year. All Canadian provinces/territories provide job protected leave of about one year (maternity and parental leave together) and, In Canada, parental leave is paid at 55% of wages up to a ceiling. UNICEF also describes "effective parental leave", meaning that a combination of duration and public funding. In a rank ordering of countries on "effectiveness" of parental leaves, Canada was given only 29 points, while Norway (e.g.) had 116 and Finland 57. Further, many new parents in Canada — students, unemployed, self-employed, precarious workers or those with too few qualifying weeks — cannot access any parental leave. Thus many new parents are left out of paid leave entirely. Canada was further marked down by UNICEF in its 2008 ECEC report card because Canada (except Quebec) does not provide leave reserved for fathers as the benchmark required.

Family leave policy has been updated three times in Canada: in 1971 when maternity benefits were introduced, in 1989 when parental leave benefits (either parent) were added and in 2003 when the duration of the benefit period doubled to 50 weeks. Still, Canadian family leave policy remains unfinished and out of date. It requires earmarked father leave, better paid benefits and a more inclusive approach so all new parents can qualify.

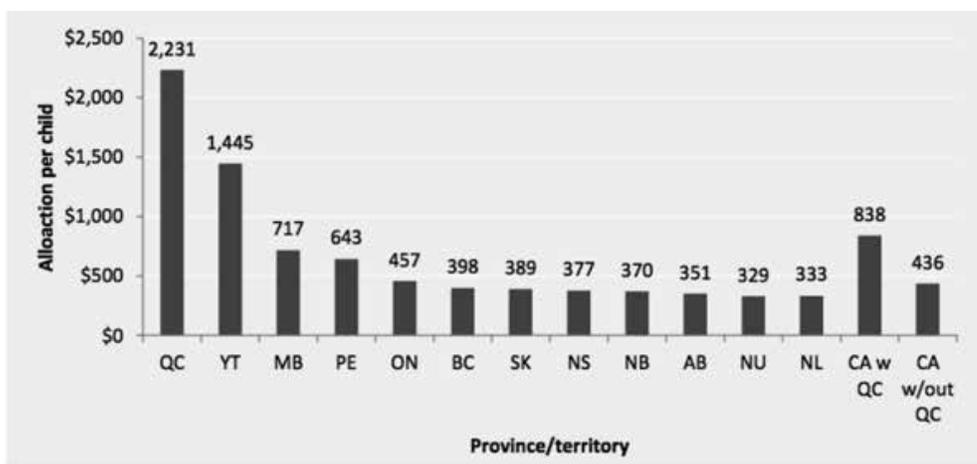
Financing

Although financing is not *per se* a "principle" of an ECEC system, *how and how much* public funding is available is key to everything else. Public funding for Canadian child care has always been considerably below the international benchmark of at least 1% of GDP for ECEC (child care and kindergarten) for 0-5 year olds.¹⁹ As Macdonald and Friendly noted:

all reports show that Canada is a very low spender on early childhood education and care (ECEC) compared to other OECD countries. Canada’s public spending on ECEC is somewhat between 0.2% and 0.34% of GDP — extremely low even in the best case. At best, Canada spends half the OECD average and one third of the recommended minimum one percent of GDP for children 0–5.²⁰

Ferns and Friendly’s 2012 analysis shows that Quebec spends about 60% of Canada’s public child care spending but still falls short of the international benchmark of 1% of GDP. While there continue to be small increases in most provinces/territories, these are often not sustained and are generally “too small and too unpredictable to allow for more than very modest growth of services while parent fees remain too high to be affordable in most of Canada”.²¹ In 2012, Canada-wide, the average annual spending per child aged 0-12 was \$436 (outside Quebec) with the provincial/territorial range from \$333 to \$2,231 (Quebec). (Current figures for kindergarten are not available and, indeed, were not provided to the OECD Family Database for 2009).

Allocation to regulated child care per child 0-12 years, 2011/12, by province/territory



In light of the very substantial public spending by Canada on the expanded Universal “Child Care” Benefit (UCCB) and Child Care Expense Deduction (CCED) calculated at close to \$8 billion annually by the Parliamentary Budget Officer yet accomplishing nothing concrete

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for families, the Canada-wide average public spending for regulated child care seems even more paltry.

Conclusion

In sum, Canada's child care pulse is weak and thready, not healthy and robust; its state remains precarious and is indeed something to be concerned about. The ECEC situation neither meets families' needs nor meets the three principles set out in the ChildCare2020 "vision" paper: universal accessibility, high quality and comprehensiveness while public spending is poorly directed at best.

Analyzing public policy for ECEC makes it abundantly clear that two things are essential for developing a system that can meet these principles: substantial, well-directed public funding and robust public policy. If public funding is too limited, this virtually guarantees that high quality services will not be available and affordable for many families while preventing the good wages needed to attract and retain highly qualified staff. At the same time, using ineffectual mechanisms and insufficient public management to deliver funding and services make it difficult to effectively "steer" towards better integration of care and education and towards delivering the right mix of high quality affordable services that families want and need. Thus, both adequate public funding and robust, well-designed public policy matter very much for ensuring an accessible, quality ECEC system that provides parental "choice". And ultimately, the public funds and the public policy are a matter of political will and an outcome of the political process.

This article sets the context for the special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* that will examine ECEC's main policy issues in more depth. While the "state of..." Canadian ECEC shows a weak pulse, what is encouraging is that in this election year Canadian political parties and the public are engaged with the issue in a new way. Thus 2015 will be a critically important year for Canadian families and children.

MARTHA FRIENDLY is the Executive Director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit which she founded in the early 1980s at the University of Toronto. She has built CRRU into a nationally and internationally recognized knowledge producer and mobilizer on ECEC. Martha has authored many publications including two books on child care policy, and has long worked collaboratively with other researchers, policy makers, social justice, advocacy and early childhood groups towards a common goal of a universal high quality ECEC program for all families and children. In 2015, Martha was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by Trent University for her contributions to research and activism for a national child care program.

Photo credit: Martha Friendly



ENDNOTES

- 1 ChildCare2020, 2014.
- 2 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008.
- 3 Ferns and Friendly, 2013.
- 4 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008.
- 5 Macdonald and Friendly, 2014.
- 6 Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2013.
- 7 See for example those of the OECD (2004, 2006) and UNICEF (2008).
- 8 Except in Ontario where four year old kindergarten is provided for all children.
- 9 Ferns and Friendly, 2013.
- 10 See Lloyd and Penn, especially Penn's introductory chapter.
- 11 See Ferns and Friendly, 2015.
- 12 See Ferns and Friendly, 2013 for more detail.
- 13 Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2013.
- 14 Macdonald and Friendly, 2014: 21.

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15 See, for example, Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou & Ereky-Stevens, 2014.

16 Flanagan, Beach and Varmuza, 2013.

17 Ferns and Friendly, 2013.

18 See Muttart Foundation, 2012.

19 UNICEF, 2008.

20 Macdonald and Friendly, 2014: 6.

21 Ferns and Friendly, 2013: 11.

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