

Canadian Comments on “Childcare and the European Union: A bumpy but upward path”

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As Jenson's paper notes, public policies concerning child care arrangements can serve multiple ends: poverty reduction via "activation"; more generally, raising employment rates; increasing birth rates; a foundation for equal opportunity (children from disadvantage/immigrant backgrounds); promoting early child development for all; and vital support for achieving equality of the sexes. At different times, Canada and the European Union have been interested in supporting child care arrangements in order to serve many of these objectives and both have encountered obstacles to achieving their desired objectives.

What I would like to focus my remarks on are first, the differential salience accorded demographic and ECE objectives in Canada and the European Union; second, the question of the link between objectives stressed and actual achievements – gender equality in the European Union and early childhood development in Canada; and finally, child care and in relation to broader questions of policy to deal with changing labour markets.

Why child care policy?

As Jenson notes, today Canada and the European Union stress different reasons for public concern with child care arrangements. The European Union has framed the issue increasingly in demographic terms – how to deal simultaneously with falling birth rates, the need to raise women's labour market participation rates (or, the importance of the earner – dual or lone parent – family) and parents' right to choose. Demographic concerns have not, however, been part of the pan-Canadian discussion of child care. Yet as Schmidtke noted, the Canadian labour force is ageing too and our fertility rate, at 1.5, is lower than that of a number of EU member states.

Why then has demography not entered into the Canadian debates? The main reason is because Canadians have long relied on immigration to meet population objectives. To cite Schmidtke again, immigration currently accounts for 60% of our population growth. One might argue that Canada, which has officially embraced multiculturalism, is and remains more open to welcoming "the others" than "fortress Europe." Yet Schmidtke's paper indicates 1) the EU and its member states are becoming more welcoming to immigrants and 2) Canada's performance as a "land of equal opportunity" for immigrants has not been very impressive, certainly of late.

I might however add, however, that several of the Canadian cities that have attracted the greatest share of immigrants – notably Toronto and Vancouver – have done a lot to develop appropriate child care programs, which reflect a genuinely multicultural approach. In this sense, child care has an important role to play in helping to make the children of newcomers feel at home – something which the OECD's study, Starting Strong (OECD, 2001), emphasised. Vancouver and Toronto are prevented from being more effective, however, by insufficient funding for child care from the provinces and the federal government (Mahon, 2006).

The main point I wanted to make, however, is that just as Europe might have something to learn from Canada about creating a more open, multicultural milieu, so too can Canada learn from the European Union that it needs to see child care policy also as a means of making it easier for those currently living in Canada to choose to have children. In fact, demographic concerns can be a powerful motivator for public support for child care, as we've seen in not only in Europe – and I'd add Japan and Korea – but also in Quebec. In fact, as Jenson's earlier (2002) work has shown, the combination of demographic concerns plus respect for parents' right to choose was an important driver behind Quebec's success in establishing its \$5 (now \$7) a day universal child care program.

The ECD objective matters because it leads to an emphasis on quality. Jenson rightly notes however that, at least in recent years, the EU has lost sight of the ECD objective, arguably with the disbanding the Network on Childcare that Peter coordinated. Why has it been important in Canada? Here I'd like to underline the role of experts, and a research community that the federal government has supported since the late 1980s. Experts in early child development like Fraser Mustard and Clyde Hertzman have played a critical part here, in making the case for quality ECEC available to all children. In other words, the Canada-EU might help the latter to rediscover the importance of supporting such a childcare research network.

Limits

The way a policy issue is framed is not always easy to translate into practice, however. Let me take two examples.

1. *Gender equality and parental leave*: While both Canada and the EU initially emphasised this dimension, it has dropped out of sight in Canada since the early 1990s while it has been kept alive in the EU. Yet when it comes to parental leave, the Canadian government has been able to use its spending power to introduce continual improvements (Macdonald, 2006). While Canada's policy still falls short of that of a few EU members like Sweden, it does more to promote gender equality than the EU's parental leave directive, which does nothing to eliminate the neo-familial policies (long leaves) of a good core of its member states (Mahon, 2002; Babies and Bosses 2003; 2004).
2. *Early Childhood Development* Although ECD has been an important objective of Canadian child care policy for nearly a decade, the series of agreements negotiated between the federal government and the provinces between 1998 and 2006 have never been able to establish a framework adequate to ensure that all provinces and territories were supporting quality, accessible child care – although each agreement moved closer to that set of objectives.
 - 1998 NCB – a combination of income transfers and spending on services to reduce child poverty. Although child care was one eligible service, little was actually invested in regulated child care, especially in the most populous provinces;
 - 2000 Early Child Development initiative – child care listed as one of 4 areas where the provinces and territories could spend federal money, but it did not require spending in all areas. In the first years, less than 10% was used for child care and only 6/13 governments invested in regulated care.
 - 2003 – Multi-lateral Framework Agreement on Early Childhood Learning and Care focused directly on preschool child care. It permitted the provinces and territories to select from a broad range of spending alternatives, from information provision through quality assurance to capital and operating grants, training and professional development and wage enhancements. Yet as *Starting Strong* showed, quality is most clearly associated with investment in the supply side.

- 2006 – bilateral agreements negotiated with all 10 provinces (Quebec included for the first time). Potentially worth \$5 billion over 5 years. Important step toward the establishment of QUA child care. The commitment to invest new federal money only in regulated care was omitted from the Quebec and New Brunswick agreements. Only two agreements made it clear that investment would only occur in non-profit forms of provision, despite numerous studies showing that non-profit providers tend to be much better than commercial counterparts at providing quality care. As Jenson noted, moreover, the agreements were not as “constraining” as the European Union’s. At the moment, of course, this is a moot point as the new federal government has made it clear that it will withdraw from the agreements at the end of the year but it does point to the difficulties Canada has faced in negotiating a set of intergovernmental arrangements adequate to the task of promoting ECD across the country.

Child care and labour market policy:

Given the broader topic of labour market integration, I’d like to end with a couple of comments on child care as part of a larger package of policies for today’s labour markets. Clearly the rise in women’s labour force participation places the issue of child care arrangements on the agenda but other changes in labour markets – notably the growth of non-standard work – also affect child care. In the narrowest sense, the growth of non-standard employment gives rise to the need for evening and weekend care. Jenson has touched on another dimension, however, and that is the European Union’s commitment to generating *quality* employment – an issue discussed in Canada in the late 1980s, with the release of the now-defunct Economic Council of Canada’s *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* report.

The emphasis on good jobs is important because it is a direct way of attacking the problem of the “working poor” – i.e. attack by eliminating bad jobs. It also means more interesting work, and hence can reduce excessive churning in the labour market. And investment in a good child care system – one that follows the QUAD principles – can be an important component of

such a post-industrial employment strategy (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Mahon, 2000). In other words, such a policy can simultaneously contribute to early child development, poverty reduction, labour force participation combined with childbearing and rearing *and* the generation of good jobs.

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