

Why high quality universal child care is part of a more equal Canada for all of us

If anything positive has emerged from Canada's rising inequality, it is that a bona fide discussion about "the Canada we want" is becoming a mainstream staple of political dialogue. Not only politicians and pundits but ordinary Canadians have begun to make the connections between health and wealth, public services and social justice, economics and the social sphere, democracy, taxation and fairness. These issues, occupying public attention since the recession began in 2008 gained strength when the Occupy Movement shone a global spotlight on inequality last year. As this dialogue has gained momentum and engaged many Canadians, the idea that a national child care program should be part of a more equal Canada has become part of the discourse.

A look at child care's long on-again, off-again history in Canada indicates that it is only in the last decade or so that the argument that early childhood education and child care is "good for the economy" has gained prominence. Historically, Canadian child care was treated as a residual welfare service for the needy, motivated in at least in part by the fact that funding child care costs was cheaper for governments than paying for social assistance. But more recently, the full-blown idea that child care is a great value-for-dollar program capable of generating increased tax revenues through mothers' employment, stimulating economic activity while improving school performance and reducing social costs later on has become dominant. In the last fifteen or so years, neo-liberal ideas about social policy, which have been characterized by commentators such as Jane Jenson¹ as a *social investment perspective*, have come to define Canadian political discourse, as well as that in other countries. These human capital arguments, which are to some extent reasonably based on child development research and on economic data, are not well linked to broader, more nuanced conversations about "the Canada we want" and reflect a substantial retreat from the social justice and equity ideas that once drove arguments for more and better child care.

As the concept of economic inequality—the gap between the rich and poor (or the 1% and the rest) — has begun to generate widespread discussion, it has become obvious that inequality is complex and varied. Gender inequality, generational inequality and racial and ethnic inequality are variations on, and are linked to, economic inequality. These "inequalities" are shaped by many of the same political structures, circumstances and ideology that have inhibited development of the child care system needed by so many Canadians. At the same time, it is obvious to many that government leadership is essential for creating the solid public policy frameworks and sustained public funding that are shown to be central to creating a system of high quality early childhood education and care that can contribute to reducing inequality and creating a fairer, more inclusive Canada for all.

¹ Jenson, J. (2009). *Diffusing ideas for after neoliberalism: The social investment perspective in Europe and Latin America*. Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association. Ottawa: Carleton University, 29 May 2009

As current research² shows, Canada's growing generational inequality means that young families are squeezed on all sides. To be sure, a child care system alone can't solve "up-stream" issues such as stagnant wages, hard-to-find good jobs, high educational debt and increasing costs of living such as housing. But today's young mothers and fathers need to work harder and longer than did their parents while student debt, high housing costs and erosion of Canada's never-robust social safety net has left many of them struggling to survive. Young families need the support of a variety of good economic and social policies but—many would argue—that—"child care is the backbone of them all"³. Child care enables young parents to get the education/training they need to access good jobs (if good jobs are available), allowing mothers and fathers to work without enduring years-long child care wait lists or breaking the family budget. At the same time, all parents can better balance work and family if they can be confident that their children are safe, thriving and happy.

For women, economic inequality is still a reality three decades after the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Despite record numbers of women in higher education and high labour force participation, the lack of public services to care for young children, and—increasingly—aging parents as well, undermines women's equality as women continue to fill in the gaps to make up for the lack of public services. Most mothers cannot afford to, or choose not to, stay home but without access to good child care, may be forced into lower wage jobs or part time work with little prospects for benefits or a pension. Access to reliable child care makes it more possible for low income or sole support parents (who are often young women) to take advantage of opportunities for advancement. Child care has been, and still is, a key women's issue, and is fundamental to any agenda for women's equality.

Canada's weak child care situation also contributes to racial and ethnic inequality. Aboriginal people experience Canada's most extreme inequality but the child care programs that could support Aboriginal families in employment, training and education (as well as early childhood education for their children) are limited and fragmented, with multiple federal early childhood education and care programs spread across multiple federal departments. Federal funds for these programs—never robust—have been even further diminished in recent years. At the same time, the OECD notes that as the gap between rich and poor Canadians has widened, newcomers to Canada (often racialized groups) are often relegated to the low income sector and unable to gain a foothold in Canada. Thus, not only are inclusive early childhood education and child care programs effective vehicles for helping all young children develop positive ideas about diversity but a basic necessity for supporting the employment, training and education opportunities that Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee families need.

Economic inequality affects children too. While human capital arguments about investing in the next generation and creating a better future workforce are marshaled to provide the rationale for programs such as full-day kindergarten, children need good "care" as much

² Kershaw, P. (2011). *Does Canada work for all generations?* Vancouver, University of British Columbia, Human Early Learning Partnership.

³ National Council of Welfare. (1999). *Preschool children: Promises to keep*. Ottawa: Author.

as "education". The idea that these are inseparable is nothing new. The research clearly shows that children benefit most—thrive intellectually, academically, socially and physically—when families are well supported, communities are inclusive and early childhood services are high quality. In practice, this means supporting parents to work or study, ensuring that struggling families have adequate resources to raise children and providing community spaces where families can actively participate, as well as making sure that children are nurtured across a spectrum of domains. All of these are facilitated by well-designed, well-integrated universally accessible high quality early childhood education and child care programs.

Finally, child care fits into an agenda for a more equal Canada though its direct link with human rights. Access to high quality child care is a children's right, a women's right, and a human right, as defined by various United Nations agreements and thus part of Canada's (and the provinces') human rights obligations. Child care as a right means ensuring that children and young families get a fair share of our collective resources. It means shifting the conversation about child care from a focus on human capital to recognition that early childhood education and child care is a human right, and it means recognizing that inequality for families and children undermines Canada as a protector of human rights and a good place to live.

Child care, as presently conceived in Canada, is constituted as a market service. It is mostly developed and delivered by market forces (including a growing, increasingly corporatized for-profit child care sector) and is paid for primarily by private (parent) funds or public funds delivered through privatized, demand-side schemes such as cheques to families, tax breaks and fee subsidies. Not only does the federal government not have a child care policy but the provinces/territories also have not developed full-articulated, integrated policy frameworks or systems. Economic, generational, gender and racial equality means creating public structures to sustain families and children by ensuring that the necessary resources to support them are provided using public funds generated through a fair tax system. With respect to child care, it means creating the universal, high quality, publicly managed early childhood education and childcare system that—if well designed as a system, not a market—can be the backbone of support for families.

Canada's child care situation "shows" very poorly in comparative international analyses. Just last month, a United Nations Committee examining Canada's progress towards our compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child admonished Canada on child care, commenting on the lack of public funding, inadequacy of provision, reliance on private, for-profit operations and absence of a coordinated, holistic approach – not the first time Canada has been taken to task regarding child care as a human right. Surely if Canadian children aren't to have 'first call', as the Convention specifies they should, their call on Canada's resources shouldn't—at the least—be last.

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