

Early childhood programs and the education system

Jane Beach¹, Jane Bertrand MEd²

J Beach, J Bertrand. Early childhood programs and the education system. *Paediatr Child Health* 2009;14(10):666-668.

Policy makers, advocates and experts agree that the current delivery of early childhood development programs is fragmented. Many point to the education system as a better alternative for a more coherent approach that has the necessary infrastructure in place in communities, and is well placed to meet the needs of all young children and their families. In other jurisdictions, early childhood development programs have moved into education. In Canada, provincial and local school authorities are taking on more early childhood programs.

Key Words: *Early childhood development; Education; Outcomes*

Mothers and their newborns connect with physicians and our universal health care system. Most infants and toddlers are immunized by a health care practitioner. The next universal touch point is the school system at entry to kindergarten. Between ages 18 months and four or five years, families pretty much fend for themselves. Until children enter the school system, they find a chaotic landscape of programs and services: from playgroups to organized, regulated child care programs; from parenting tips on supermarket bulletin boards to family resource programs and home visiting services that offer early learning opportunities and parenting support; and from do-it-yourself developmental checklists to extensive early identification and intervention services (1). It is a bewildering mix that is difficult for parents to navigate. Different programs have different costs and/or eligibility criteria. Quality assurance is mostly left up to parents. Physicians and other health care practitioners are encouraged to look at the 'whole' child, the parent-child relationship and family context, and monitor overall developmental progress during immunization and routine check-ups (2,3). They are encouraged to take the parent-child relationship and family dynamic into account (3). Physicians often want to make recommendations about, and referrals to, community early childhood programs and services, but they, too, face the bewildering mix. Once children enter the school system, there is a universal platform that physicians and others can connect to. It may not be perfect, but health care practitioners know that

Les programmes de la petite enfance et le système d'éducation

Les décideurs, les défenseurs et les experts conviennent que la prestation actuelle des programmes de développement de la petite enfance est fragmentée. Nombreux sont ceux qui avancent que le système d'éducation constituerait une approche plus cohérente, car il est déjà doté de l'infrastructure nécessaire dans les collectivités et est bien placé pour répondre aux besoins de tous les jeunes enfants et de leur famille. Dans d'autres territoires de compétence, les programmes de développement de la petite enfance sont déjà intégrés à l'éducation. Au Canada, les conseils scolaires provinciaux et locaux acceptent davantage de programmes de développement de la petite enfance.

all children are entitled to the intellectual and social environment that schools provide, and they know where to begin if they want to recommend additional supports.

The current chaotic state of early childhood programs is well documented (1,4-7). Public support for an integrated early childhood system with links to public health and to health care practitioners is gaining momentum (1,8-10). The task is daunting because it means bringing together loosely organized, community-based initiatives with well-established institutions. It also means bringing together professionals and practices that have grown up with different disciplinary lenses on early child development.

One of the foremost divides that must be traversed if we want to truly promote a platform or 'first tier' of education for the early years is the divide between knowledge and practice rooted in centuries-old policies and jurisdictional divisions (1,11). Kindergarten and, increasingly, prekindergarten remain firmly in the education sector – a provincial/territorial responsibility – which has a developed infrastructure, qualified teachers and a clear focus on educational outcomes.

Meanwhile, other early childhood programs, including child care programs, nursery schools, playgroups, preschool and family drop-in programs, remain the subject of ongoing debate regarding their relative risks and benefits (12). Delivered by a poorly supported and regulated market, these programs are frequently portrayed as the problem, rather than the solution (13). Early childhood programs that are

¹Social policy consultant; Victoria, British Columbia; ²George Brown College, School of Early Childhood, Toronto, Ontario

Correspondence: Ms Jane Bertrand, George Brown College, School of Early Childhood, 99 Gerrard Street East, Toronto, Ontario M5T 2T9.

E-mail jbertran@georgebrown.ca

Accepted for publication October 6, 2009

licensed child care programs are supported by a complex regulatory environment that is different from the education system, and is focused on minimal health and safety provisions, not educational outcomes. Often, multiple ministries or departments are involved in the delivery of early childhood programs. Parents pay for the majority of child care programs. Public funding from provincial and territorial departments and ministries varies among early childhood programs and across provincial/territorial boundaries. The amounts and types of various grants and fee subsidies often change. The results are mediocre quality for children, program instability and limited access for families (14).

In Canada, there have been some heated political debates over where early childhood programs should take place and who should be delivering them (15). While parents confront great difficulties negotiating the split between 'education' and 'care', advocates and experts know that good education 'cares' and good child care 'educates'.

Internationally, the trend among countries is to integrate early childhood programs under one ministry or department, usually education, and offer at least two (often three) years of free, publicly funded provision before compulsory schooling begins (7,16). The shift of early childhood programs in the education system has happened in France, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, Slovenia, England, Scotland, Brazil, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (17). In these jurisdictions, early childhood programs are set up to deliver care and education to preschool children in one seamless program.

In Canada, many recent early childhood programs and policies are associated with education (14,18):

- In British Columbia, early learning is part of the mandate of schools and has resulted in the Early Learning Program, a curriculum framework for all early childhood programs. The recent feasibility study of full-day kindergarten recommended pilot programs for children four and five years of age. The government has now announced the implementation of full-day kindergarten in September 2010. The education system operates more than 200 StrongStart BC programs (family drop-in programs), mostly in school locations.
- Saskatchewan has moved child care into the education department and continues to expand the delivery of prekindergarten programs by school districts for children three and four years of age.
- Manitoba has established a 'child care in schools' policy, including the use of surplus school space as a first-choice location for child care centres.
- Prince Edward Island has moved child care programs into the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Full-day kindergarten programs will be offered as part of the school system commencing in September 2010.

- New Brunswick is supporting four school-based demonstration sites that are integrating the delivery of care and education programs.
- In 2008, Nova Scotia cancelled a two-year pilot project that offered early childhood programs to children four years of age through the education system but did move up the age eligibility, allowing younger children to enter kindergarten.
- Ontario is moving toward full-day programming for children four to 12 years of age delivered within the education system, and the shift of all early childhood programming for children up to four years of age into the education ministry.
- As part of the school system, Quebec offers full-day kindergarten and out-of-school programming to all children aged five years and to some aged four years.

It makes sense to have education as the home base for early childhood programs. Its primary focus is on all children. Education values lifelong learning and recognizes that children are learners from birth. A strong infrastructure exists within education including financing, data systems, training, support, curriculum, evaluation and research. Education is a publicly recognized, familiar system that enjoys a high level of confidence in Canada (19).

Many have concerns about bringing early childhood programs into education (15). The concerns revolve around two issues: 'schoolification' and 'cherry-picking'. Schoolification is the label given to the phenomena of pushing down primary school academic work into preprimary programs. Early childhood programs are viewed merely as preparation for success in grade one, justifying attempts to fast-track children's early reading and math skills. Cherry-picking happens when schools and the education system take on only the easier-to-deliver segments of programming, such as part-day programs or lower cost family drop-in programs, while ignoring the needs of working parents and their children for continuity and stability. Both of these concerns can be addressed if education moves forward to integrate care and education, rather than creating more new programs (20,21).

From a policy perspective, moving early childhood program delivery to education puts it forward as part of the public good – a resource that brings benefits to users and nonusers alike and is, therefore, deserving of public resources. As long as early learning remains a market service, it will be difficult to make real progress. The integration of early childhood programs and kindergarten for young children and their families builds a platform that can incorporate a host of family support, public health and early intervention initiatives (22). Consequently, the crosswalk between primary health care and a unified early childhood program platform within the public education system becomes a much more efficient and effective process than the current landscape facing health care practitioners, young children and their families.

REFERENCES

1. McCain M, Mustard F, Shanker S. Early Years Study 2: Putting science into action. Toronto: Council for Early Child Development, 2007.
2. Bertrand J, Williams R, Ford-Jones L. Social paediatrics and early child development – the practical enhancements: Part 2. 2008;13:857-61.
3. Halfon N, Inkelas M. Optimizing the health and development of children. *JAMA* 2003;290:3136-8.
4. Friendly M. Can Canada walk and chew gum? The state of child care in Canada in 2009. *Our Schools/Our Selves* 2009;18:39-65.
5. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Childcare Transition. Innocenti Report Card 8. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008. <<http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=507>> (Version current at October 30, 2009).
6. Pascal C. An updated and annotated summary of evidence: A compendium to: With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario. Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2009.
7. Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Directorate for Education. Early Childhood Care and Education Policy: Canada Country Note. Paris: OECD Secretariat, 2004. <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/42/34/33850725.pdf>> (Version current at October 30, 2009).
8. Pascal C. With our best future in mind: Early learning in Ontario. Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2009.
9. Siraj-Blatchford I, Siraj-Blatchford J. Improving development outcomes for children through effective practice in integrating early years services. London: Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in children and Young People's Services, 2009.
10. Center for Community Child Health. Policy Brief No 11 2008: Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services. Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a.
11. Friendly M. Building a strong and equal partnership between childcare and early childhood education in Canada. *Int J Child Care Educ Policy* 2008;2:36-52.
12. Clarke-Stewart A, Allhusen VD. *What We Know About Childcare*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005.
13. Belsky J, Barnes J, Melhuish E, eds. *The National Evaluation of Sure Start: Does Area-based Early Intervention Work?* Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007.
14. Beach J, Friendly M, Ferns C, Parbhu N, Forer B. *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2008*. Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2009.
15. Shaker E, ed. *Beyond child's play: Caring for and educating young children in Canada*. *Our Schools/Our Selves* 2009;18.
16. Moss P, Bennett J. Toward a new pedagogical meeting place? Bringing early childhood into the education system. Briefing paper for a Nuffield Educational Seminar: September 26, 2006. <www.childcarecanada.org/res/issues/blending.htm> (Version current at October 30, 2009).
17. Bennett J. Early childhood education and care systems in the OECD countries: The issue of tradition and governance. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Montreal: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, 2008:1-5. <<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BennettANGxp.pdf>> (Version current at October 30, 2009).
18. Cleveland G, Corter C, Pelletier J, Colley S, Bertrand J, Jamieson J. Early childhood learning and development in child care, kindergarten and family support programs. Toronto: Atkinson Centre at OISE/UT, 2006. <<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/67F194AF-8EB5-487D-993C-7CF9B565DDB3/0/SFREarlyChildhoodLearning.pdf>> (Version current at October 30, 2009).
19. Canadian Education Association. *Public Education in Canada*. Toronto: CEA, 2007.
20. Moss P, Penn H. *Transforming Nursery Education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd, 1996.
21. Cohen B, Moss P, Petrie P, Wallace J. *A New Deal for Children? Reforming Education and Care in England, Scotland and Sweden*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 2004.
22. Corter C, Pelletier J, Janmohamed Z, et al. *Toronto First Duty Phase 2 Final Research Report: December 2008*. Toronto: Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Institute of Child Study, Department of HDAP, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2008.