

About Canada: Childcare

Martha Friendly and Susan Prentice

Reviewed by Luc Thériault, University of New Brunswick

As part of its new About Canada Series, Fernwood Publishing recently released Childcare written by two recognized Canadian experts on the issue. The About Canada books are small, easy to read monographs which clearly articulate a position on a relevant public policy topic. In the introduction, the authors define Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and explain that they use the lens of quality and access in their analysis. They aptly stress that for many years childcare has fallen into the welfare (categorical) policy silo as opposed to the education (universal) silo. As such, it has suffered from a long association with charity, stigma, and the accompanying eligibility testing.

Obviously, Friendly and Prentice would rather like to see childcare moved to the more positive education silo in years to come. They review, in chapter 1, what we know about childcare and why it is so badly needed at a time when Canadian families are changing, with a large majority of mothers participating in the labour force. The authors make the argument that ECEC is not only good for children, but also for the modern economy, for equity and for social solidarity.

In chapter 2, Friendly and Prentice review what we do in Canada in the field of childhood education and childcare. This description does not present a pretty

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picture, but rather "a patchwork, hodgepodge system, unplanned and utterly inadequate." (29) Not surprisingly, Canada compares rather poorly in terms of policy for ECEC at the international level.

So what is missing? This is the question addressed in chapter 3. One can certainly identify the lack of a focus on quality and access. Although quality is a complex concept to define when it comes to ECEC, Friendly and Prentice stress that the OECD has identified clear policy characteristics that can go a long way in resolving this debate. Access refers simultaneously to the issues of availability, coverage, affordability, and appropriateness. The market-based model has proven itself incapable to deliver on both access and quality because it has focused the financing of the system solely on the "demand-side," according to Friendly and Prentice.

Chapter 4 brings us back in time for a moment to understand the history of how we got to where we are now. A particularly interesting table 4-1 (80–81) presents the milestones in Canadian ECEC development, from the early beginnings in the mid-1850s to the initiative of the Harper Conservative government.

Chapter 5 examines the political difficulties and particularities of the Canadian federation and of its liberal welfare state as it relates to the development of ECEC policies. The authors are of the view that "Ottawa's role in shaping national priorities has diminished over the past three decades and provincial power has increased." (96) While this affirmation is open to debate, what is not is the stronghold of the neo-liberal ideology which now permeates the civic and political culture of Canadians to a significant degree. As a result, many citizens now doubt the capacity of the State to intervene effectively through a universal ECEC system. Frequently, this view is reinforced by the mainstream media.

As explained in chapter 6, the childcare debate in Canada is multi-dimensional. Is childcare good for children? Should it be targeted only to disadvantaged groups? Do we need regulations and public financing? Who should run the ECEC programs? Can we afford it? The authors begin to provide some answers to these questions, albeit very briefly before proposing, in chapter 7, a ten-point action plan leading to universal childcare in Canada.

As a primer for those who have not followed the childcare debate in recent years, this is an informative and practical book. It does suffer, however, from a certain one-sidedness that will occasionally annoy the more informed reader. For instance, much more could have been said concerning the arguments of those who oppose a universal childcare system because of the inflexibility of the arrangements it tends to offer. Similarly, the jury is still out on the long-term developmental benefits for non-poor children frequenting a childcare centre.

In spite of these shortcomings, the book represents an excellent steppingstone into the study of an issue which divides both academics and average Canadians alike. By offering accessible and concise information and analysis about childcare in Canada, Friendly and Prentice have served us well as public intellectuals.