

What a difference a decade makes: Counting the benefits of investment in early childhood development in Quebec

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Child care services in Quebec have undergone a major transformation since 1997, when the government adopted its new family policy. One of the linchpins of this innovative policy was the setting up of a network of fixed-fee services for all children aged five years and younger, irrespective of family income. The network was intended to address the issue of work-family balance and to provide children, no matter what the financial status of their parents, with a preschool environment that fosters their social, emotional and cognitive development, and prepares them for entry into the school system (1).

Quebec's change in policy represented a real commitment by the government to both early learning and child care programs. Quebec is, therefore, unique in Canada in the number of available regulated, fixed-fee, reduced-contribution child care places. In 2006, the number of regulated child care places in Quebec represented approximately 38% of all regulated places in Canada (2). The province is also unique in its method of funding them: cash payments or refundable tax credits to families were largely replaced by a system of direct funding of services, making regulated child care spaces more affordable for the vast majority of families. In 2009, direct grants to child care services represent approximately 37% of the provincial budget for families, or \$2.4 billion (3). This led to a significant increase in demand that, in turn, stimulated the rapid growth of the sector. In 1997, Quebec had 82,302 regulated child care places (4). More than 10 years later, by March 2009, this number has reached 212,777 (which includes 6954 places in for-profit daycares that are regulated but not subsidized) with the objective of bringing the total number of funded spaces to 220,000 by 2012 (5). Presently, more than one-half of Quebec's preschool-age children have access to home- or centre-based child care that is regulated and affordable (currently, the parental contribution is \$7 per day) – a more than 2.5-fold increase since the implementation of the policy in 1997 (4-6).

More than 10 years later, what benefits can we detect from this investment in early childhood education and care? First, we observe a sharp rise in the number of children in regulated child care. There is also evidence that this attendance is having beneficial effects on the behaviour and cognitive development of the children. These benefits are particularly evident among vulnerable children (7,8). Second, available and affordable child care accompanied by a generous parental

leave program may have had an impact on Quebec's demographic profile: compared with the other provinces, Quebec has had the largest increase in its birth rate over the past five years (9). Furthermore, families have greatly benefited from Quebec's child care model: the increased availability of spaces has facilitated mothers' attendance at an educational institution or return to work. In fact, provincial statistics indicate that labour force participation among mothers of preschool-age children has increased significantly over the past 10 years and has surpassed the percentage of mothers' labour force participation observed in the rest of Canada. More precisely, in 1976, their participation rate was well below the Canadian average (30.0% versus 35.6%), before catching up to the national average by 1999. Since 2000, it has accelerated further and surpassed the national average by 4.2 points (76.0% versus 71.8%) in 2005 (10,11). Compared with mothers in the rest of Canada, mothers in Quebec work more hours and weeks per year and have a higher annual income (10). This improves the socioeconomic conditions in which their children grow up – conditions that have been shown to have an influence on a multitude of spheres of children's development including health outcomes, school readiness and psychosocial adjustment (12). Finally, families are not the only ones to benefit from the return of mothers to the workforce, and subsequent increases in family income and spending power. There are also positive repercussions on the economy through the creation of child care jobs, so that the government is able to recover through taxes some of the costs associated with early childhood education and care.

Despite the many advantages of these services for children, families and society, the Quebec experience teaches us other lessons, and they aren't so rosy. Two recent large-scale studies (4,13) have found that child care quality is minimal overall. Although there is evidence that child care attendance is beneficial for some children, the effect on developmental outcomes, albeit statistically significant, are relatively small. This suggests that Quebec's child care network has not attained the general level of quality needed to have a larger impact on the social, emotional and cognitive development of all children. Furthermore, quality levels vary significantly according to the type of child care setting: nonprofit early childhood centres (Centres de la Petite Enfance, or CPEs) generally offer better quality services than for-profit daycares.

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In the late 1990s, a moratorium was imposed on the creation of new for-profit daycares. When that moratorium was lifted in 2003 by the incoming government, the for-profit sector experienced a surge in growth, despite the fact that there is compelling and consistent evidence that this sector is generally of lower quality than the nonprofit sector (4,13,14). Furthermore, almost one-half of the children attending child care in Quebec are in home-based settings. Although regulated home-based care (accredited, supervised and coordinated by CPEs) is superior in quality to the unregulated home-based service – still used by a large number of parents because demand for regulated and subsidized spaces is far greater than supply – the proportionally large expansion of the home-based child care sector has had questionable repercussions. The required qualifications of staff are minimal: family child care providers are only required to hold a first-aid certificate and complete a training program lasting at least 45 h pertaining to child development, health, safety and diet issues, and organization and leadership in a ‘life environment’. Thus, there is no guarantee that home care providers are well-equipped to offer the high-quality environment that stimulates children and responds adequately to their developmental needs.

Finally, and unfortunately, the most vulnerable children are the least likely to attend child care, a potential protective factor in their lives (4,8). There are waiting lists for CPEs of one to two years. Also, because child care services are not sectorized as are schools, CPEs located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which are generally of better quality than other types of child care, are not obliged to provide services for children living in the surrounding area, ie, those who most need it. In addition, although children of families receiving social assistance may attend a child care service free of charge on a part-time basis (up to a maximum of 23.5 h per week), many child care services prefer full-time attendance for administrative reasons and, therefore, do not give priority to children from these families. A lesson from this might be that CPEs using public funds should be required to set aside more spaces for vulnerable children and to offer flexible part-time attendance to make their services more equitable.

The creation of this type of network of child care services raises many questions related to interventions aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable children. Quebec opted for a universal approach. However, the most vulnerable children are least likely to benefit from these services, and vulnerable children who use child care are more likely to attend settings of lower quality (4). It should be noted, however, that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not the only ones at risk of having their educational trajectory compromised by behavioural problems or cognitive delays (8). Therefore, a strategy comprising only programs aimed at the disadvantaged segment of the population would not include all children who might be in difficulty. We need targeted programs that are part of a universal approach – ie, a strategy that responds to the needs of children from more advantaged

socioeconomic backgrounds, while investing more heavily in those children who demonstrate the greatest need.

Quebec has laid the groundwork for an important social structure that is beneficial to children and their families. Yet its child care system must be seen as a work in progress, and we must continue striving to improve its quality. Good child care is expensive, but there is convincing evidence that investing in early childhood education and care yields high economic and social returns (15,16). These results cannot be ignored, especially in the light of the current economic downturn and the ongoing clamour for significant increases in government spending to improve the future of our nation – our children are our future. The need to devote more funds to our human capital has never been greater, and investments in a universal, subsidized and not-for-profit early childhood education and care system staffed by qualified workers would benefit not only children and families, but also the economy, stimulating our economic recovery.

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