



Down Under is on top in early childhood programs

Hillel Goelman, Globe and Mail, 06 Sep 04

The new federal government has promised to introduce legislation to launch an early child care and development system in Canada. This is good news. Research consistently shows that early child care and development programs for young children result in higher levels of school readiness and better academic performance. The government's promise is also long overdue: Every jurisdiction in Canada except Quebec lags far behind most other developed countries in this area.

I recently studied New Zealand's experience with effective programs and policies in early childhood education and care. It has much to teach Canada. While the two countries differ in terms of size and population, both are parliamentary democracies with advanced social-welfare systems offering a similar range of early childhood education and care programs, and so meaningful comparisons are possible.

Far more New Zealand children (64 per cent) aged newborn to 4 have access to such programs than do Canadian children (12.1 per cent). Close to 100 per cent of all children in New Zealand today have participated in at least one kind of licensed early-childhood group program in their first five years of life. Aiming its sights even higher, the New Zealand government has recently announced its goal to provide free and universal ECEC programs to all children by 2007. Clearly, New Zealand parents have both greater access and more choice than do Canadians.

Accessibility also applies to the indigenous populations in both countries. About 30.6 per cent of Maori preschool children in New Zealand attend "Te Kohanga Reo" (or "language nest") programs that serve as Maori language-immersion and school-readiness programs for six hours each day. The only comparable program in Canada is Head Start, which meets for 2.5 hours per day and reaches only 16 per cent of off-reserve aboriginal children.

New Zealand also oversees the quality of its programs more coherently. It has adopted a strategic plan that spells out the goals and actions that are to be undertaken in a 10-year timeline by different stakeholders and levels of government. Canada has no such strategy to guide ECEC programs here.

New Zealand's program guidelines (known as "Te Wharike," a Maori term meaning "the woven mat") assist teachers in the design and implementation of developmentally and culturally appropriate activities; it's not just an introduction of the primary school curriculum to preschool children. Te Wharike is taught in all ECEC teacher-training programs across the country, thus ensuring consistency and continuity.

ECEC teacher training is more extensive in New Zealand than in Canada. All New Zealand's early childhood teachers must complete three-year postsecondary training programs, most of them in the same colleges and faculties of education that prepare primary and secondary teachers.

In Canada, early childhood education teacher training requirements range from no formal training to, in a few cases, a one- or two-year training program in a community college. Very little Canadian ECEC teacher training is conducted in colleges or faculties of education. And while the New Zealand Education Review Office regularly assesses the program quality in all educational settings, including ECEC programs -- and makes those assessments public -- the only similar monitoring function in Canada is probably an initial licensing visit, and occasional follow-up visits, which focus primarily on health and safety. As far as I know, New Zealand's regular assessments aren't matched anywhere in Canada.

New Zealand's Ministry of Education is responsible for all programs for children up to age 4; the ministry provides direct operating funds, develops curriculums, trains teachers, administers child-care-subsidy programs and special-needs preschool programs and evaluates program quality. In New Zealand, early-childhood education is ranked as highly as all other educational programs.

By contrast, in Canada, federal, provincial and territorial ministries of education have little or no responsibility for delivering ECEC programs. Responsibility is instead spread across different government ministries (i.e. health, human resources, children and families), often resulting in the fragmentation of planning, policies and programs. And tensions among federal and territorial/provincial levels of government over funding, services and accountability obstruct coherent planning.

New Zealand more generously funds ECEC programs than does Canada. While Ottawa has recently increased funding somewhat, as part of various agreements between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, Canada still invests far less than most other developed countries (less than 0.5 per cent of GDP) in early child development. Further, only a small portion of these federal funds is used for child-care operating costs; in some jurisdictions, expenditures on child-care services have actually declined.

The New Zealand government funds approximately 85 per cent of basic operating costs for early childhood care programs, with the balance made up through nominal parent fees and fundraising. Even more support is available through special incentive grants to programs that have raised quality. In Canada, the opposite is the case; parent fees typically cover 80 per cent of the costs of running child-care programs. New Zealand is doing far more than Canada in providing the resources to deliver accessible, affordable and high quality ECEC programs.

In budget year 2004-2005, New Zealand, with a population of 3.9 million, allocated \$451-million in direct operating subsidies to child-care programs. Canada, with nearly 10 times the population of New Zealand has invested a similar amount, \$500-million. While New Zealand's \$451-million goes to direct operating subsidies for child-care programs, most of Canada's \$500-million goes to a range of different early childhood support services (i.e. nutrition counselling, drop-in centres); only a small percentage goes to direct operating grants for ECEC programs.

Almost every province or territory invests less in child care than does New Zealand. For example, British Columbia, which has a similar number of newborn to 4-year-olds (280,000) as New Zealand (250,000), has allocated \$48-million in the current budget year to child-care operating expenses (compared to New Zealand's \$451-million). Only Quebec, which has almost twice as many children as New Zealand, spends more than New Zealand.

The country where *The Lord of the Rings* was filmed has a magical beauty, but there's no magic in New Zealand's approach to early childhood education. Its governments have invested heavily in implementing high quality programs for young children and families. Canada's leaders should live up to their rhetoric and exert the political will and financial resources to create affordable, accessible and high quality child-care programs. Our children deserve no less.

Hillel Goelman, a professor at the University of British Columbia. He was recently a visiting fellow at the Children's Issues Centre , University of Otago, in Dunedin, N.Z.