

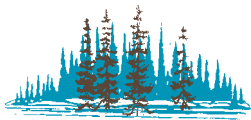
Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

Integrating Child Care and Early Education: A Central Theme in Early Learning and Care



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Toward a Provincial Framework for Early Learning and Care in Alberta

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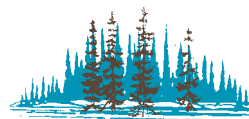
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There is a growing consensus that child care and early education are inseparable.

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, 1999

1.0 Introduction

The idea of “integrating” what have historically been treated as two separate sets of children’s services in Canada – child care under a social services mandate and kindergarten as the first step of public education — has become one of the key issues in early learning and care (ELC). The division between “care” and “early childhood education” programs dates back to initiatives by 19th century social reformers who were responsible for founding both custodial crèches for the children of indigent mothers as well the early education programs that they saw as beneficial for young children. The split between early childhood education and child care persisted throughout the 20th century and still shapes much of the discussion about early learning and care for young children and their families today.

The divide between care and education is not uniquely Canadian and was once the practice in most countries (Moss, 2006). ECEC integration was identified as a key international trend in 2001 (OECD, 2001), as many countries moved toward, if not to the full practice of, integrating what are increasingly understood as complementary or common services. In many, if not most, jurisdictions integrating child care and early education is a work in progress.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the idea of integrating early learning and care. It summarizes the main arguments for integration, outlines some of the key questions that research suggests should be considered when approaching integration, and briefly describes some recent integration efforts in Canada. The more detailed exploration of possible ‘integrative elements’ for ELC in Alberta is presented in a larger separate discussion paper.

2.0 Integrating early learning and care – Meeting the needs of children and their families

The importance of positive early years experiences, including early learning and care, in supporting early childhood development and family well-being is well documented (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). At the same time, with the majority of mothers with young children now in the labour force (Beach et al, 2009) most provinces have begun to consider how best to bridge the historic divide between child care and early education.

The realization that the longstanding division between care and early education does not meet the needs of parents or those of their young children has been widely discussed, with numerous studies and reports urging change (CCAAC, 2004). A 2010 analysis, conducted for the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC), identified the shift towards an education mandate and the integration of child care and early education as the most important issues facing the field (Flanagan and Beach, 2010).

Four main arguments have driven much of the discussion around integration (Penn et al, 2004):

- First, the benefits to young children of consistent care and education in the same place and at the same time, as well as some continuity of service as they move through their early years (Kagan and Neuman, 1998);
- Second, the benefits to families of accessing more integrated services and the reductions in time pressures and stresses that follow (Higgins et al, 2007; Duxbury and Higgins, 2009);

- Third, the potential cost-effectiveness of removing the divisions between services (Penn et al, 2004); and
- Fourth, interest in addressing the significant service gaps for children younger than kindergarten age, as well as interests in social inclusion and reducing child and family poverty (Bennett, 2011; Children in Scotland, 2011).

From the perspective of young children, how integrated their days are, how many different adults they see, how many peers or groups they encounter, and how many transitions they must make have implications for their well-being and development. Kagan and Neumann use the term “horizontal transitions” to refer to the early learning and care experiences of many young children as they ‘move among home, school, and in the community *from one caretaking/educational setting to another*’ (1998: 336). Their research stresses the importance for young children of some measure of pedagogical continuity involving teachers, child care staff and parents, an argument reiterated in a cross-Canada project on integrating care and education for four and five-year olds (Colley, 2006). At the same time, from a parent perspective while integrating early learning for young children is not the sole solution to time pressures and stress, it is one that clearly can make a difference.

3.0 What the idea of integrating early learning and care means

Integration is an umbrella term that encompasses many different meanings. It may refer only to different types of services working alongside one another, in adjacent spaces, loosely coordinated, but without any fundamental change of approach; or it may mean a coherent service equally accessible to all potential users, with a common costing, staffing, health, pedagogic and curricular framework for all provision. It may also mean combining care and health provision, rather than care and education provision (Penn et al 2004).

The term ‘integration’ is widely used in the literature, with variations in its meaning as well as the specific initiatives or approaches it is used to describe (Cohen et al, 2004). The term variously refers to ‘coordination’, ‘joined up’, ‘network’, ‘complementary’ or ‘joint’ in respect to services. The services that jurisdictions look to integrate (child care, kindergarten, family support services or school-age child care), the different policy domains included (e.g. education, social services, or health), as well as the levels or points of integration vary from situation to situation.

Full integration describes ELC services that are ‘seamless’ across multiple dimensions including the level of access for children under the age of three and those from three up to school age; ministerial or departmental responsibility for services; the education, working conditions and remuneration of staff; the underlying educational philosophy and curriculum that guides service delivery; and, the regulation and oversight of services (Children in Scotland, 2011). By contrast, ‘partial integration’ or ‘split system’ refers to

the care and education of young children that is split both by age (children in the age groups 0 - 3 and 3 - 6 years attend different types of services), with different staff complements, different curriculum approaches and administrative functions (different ministries are involved with different aims and concepts of work with children)” (Children in Scotland, 2011: P.4¹).

To analyze ECEC integration, Cohen et al (2004) used a framework that considers a number of dimensions: levels of government; departmental responsibility; funding; curriculum; regulation; staffing and training. The idea of different dimensions or aspects of integration provides a useful approach to describing or assessing integration initiatives. The Canadian Integration Network Project similarly highlights the idea of multiple points that can be integrated and defines structural integration as occurring “when the child receives a range of services from different programs without repeated registration procedures, waiting periods, different philosophies, human resources practices and funding systems” (Colley, 2006). The Toronto First Duty project, reaffirms this idea of multiple points or aspects of integration and, as part of its assessment of the progress towards integration, considers changes in five aspects of service: local governance, seamless access, learning environments, staffing, and parent participation (2005).

¹ This study identified six European countries as having fully integrated ECEC systems – Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Slovenia and Latvia, and four more—Germany, Austria, Spain and the UK as having partially integrated systems. The study project includes up-to-date profiles of a number of European countries that provide very detailed descriptions of their approaches to integration (available online at <http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi/wfi5.htm>).

4.0 Key considerations in integrating early learning and care

Integrating child care and early education services, however, is challenging and complex (Moss and Bennett, 2006). Different countries (as well as regions within countries) remain at different stages in the process. And while there is a ‘growing consensus’ that ‘care’ and ‘education’ are ‘inseparable’, and that high quality services for young children incorporate both (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006), there are different approaches to integration that recognize these points.

Integrating ELC also raises important questions about the values, principles and desired outcomes that underpin services, as well as how they are funded, organized, governed and delivered. At least four key considerations emerge in the literature that cut across various integration efforts suggesting their importance as themes for consideration: system governance, public management, financing and educational or pedagogical approaches. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

Integration and governance

Much of the discussion about integration centres on the elimination of what is referred to as the ‘split system’ approach – a product of the historic divisions between child care viewed as a social service for vulnerable families or working parents and early education services as ‘education’ or development for young children. This division shapes how services are delivered, funded and staffed and to whom they are accessible. It commonly results in a two-tier organization of services - child care for younger children followed by ‘pre-primary education’ for three², four or five-year-olds (Bennett, 2008). Within these split systems, it is child care services that usually remain underdeveloped, operating as a patchwork of individual, usually private, programs with poor access for families, limited public funding support and low-waged almost all female staff with poor employment conditions and low educational requirements (relative to other teaching professionals).

The removal of this division through the transfer of early learning and care to education ministries is seen by some commentators as an important first step with the potential both to extend the principles and values of public education to early learning and care and to support the development of a common framework for service delivery (Pascal, 2009; Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC & Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2011). Others caution that this step alone is not sufficient to support a fully integrated system, as there are other significant elements of governance to be considered, for example the matter of public versus private ownership (Cohen et al, 2004), as well as non-governance considerations such as the nature of early learning, human resources, financing and pedagogy (Moss and Bennett, 2006).

² In Alberta (and Canada in general), which use a split-age model, it is only five year olds (in kindergarten) who are likely to be in universal, funded ECEC services (called “top tier” in this study). In most of the European countries with age-split models, all three, four and five year olds have access to these “top tier”, universal, publicly-funded programs, leaving only infants and toddlers. In contrast, in Canada, most three and four year olds fall into the lower tier, more poorly supported child care services.

Integration and public management

Another key consideration relates to the matter of public management. Generally, early learning services as part of public education are shaped by strong public management that extends to articulating clear values, purposes and goals for services, active system and service planning, data collection and analysis (including a focus on child outcomes), human resource planning and management and a sustainable approach to financing. By contrast, the public management of child care services is more limited, with a greater emphasis on private responsibility and the reliance on a market delivery model. For many child care services, the public management role focuses on the regulation of services and the allocation of funding to support service access, often through financial support to targeted families, rather than larger scale service planning and development (Bennett, 2011; Penn, 2012).

In practice, in Canada and beyond, as individual jurisdictions move to integrate child care and early learning services there is an emerging balance between the public management approaches of education and the reliance on markets to organize and deliver services more common in child care. The public management of ELC thus involves ‘mixed market’ or ‘quasi market’ approaches with provinces determining the appropriate level of public involvement, the amount and form of public funding and the nature of public oversight. In large part, the approaches provinces take to integration reflect their own cultural and political traditions as well as concerns around the management and control of public costs.

Integration and financing

Financing is one of the most important policy tools, or levers in integrating ELC services. While all the considerations discussed in this paper are significant, financing, both from policy and program perspectives, is perhaps predominant. How ELC is viewed, the prevailing values and cultural norms and the purposes and goals ascribed to it, shapes both how much public funding is available and the mechanisms by which it flows to services. In turn, both the amount and the

form of public funding shape the key elements of ELC provision such as quality, accessibility, equity, human resources, and physical environments.

Researchers studying ELC integration identify the more limited and less systemic public funding of services for infants and toddlers in split ELC systems, and highlight the poor access for families, low wages and poor employment conditions (and problematic quality) that commonly result (Bennett, 2008). Not only *how much*, but *how* services are financed makes a difference in integration. The importance of operational, or base, funding ‘as in the traditional education model’ is highlighted in the OECD’s finding that this form of funding seems to be a ‘surer way to ensure well-trained staff and enriched learning environments – both of which are strong indicators of quality and learning’ (OECD, 2006).

Integration and pedagogy

The challenges, as well as the importance, of developing a strong and equal partnership between ‘care’ and ‘education’ have drawn the attention of numerous researchers (Moss, 2006; Moss and Bennett, 2006). The tendency to treat early childhood services as ‘junior partners’, with the main purpose of early learning that of preparing children for formal schooling, are identified as strong forces that need to be addressed if integration efforts are to preserve those aspects of early learning that differentiate it from education for older children.

The unequal partnership between different early learning and care stakeholders, and a limited conceptualization of early learning, raises the risk of the ‘schoolification’ of early years services (making them more school-like), particularly for older preschoolers 3 – 6 years of age. This approach contrasts with the OECD’s position, outlined in the *Starting Strong* reports, that early learning and care services are important elements of the education process in their own right and not simply a ‘downward extension of the school system’ (Penn et al, 2004; Cohen et al, 2004; Moss and Bennett, 2006). Striking an appropriate balance, which affirms that high quality child care is indeed early learning (Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, 2010), remains important to reduce the risk of the expectations or requirements of other aspects of schooling being transferred to early learning and care.

Researchers also emphasize that there is little value in linking or connecting services that are of a poor quality or linking poor-quality and high quality programs (Kagan and Neuman, 1998). Incorporating poor quality child care into an early learning system with enriched or strengthened educational goals is of little value, while using integration as a vehicle to expand access to services, without appropriate attention to the quality of the services provided, represents a poor use of public funds (Pokorny, 2011).

A pedagogical approach that supports children's development and 'education' in the broadest sense is seen by some researchers as an important integrative element in the joining up of early learning and care services (Moss and Bennett, 2006; Petrie et al, 2009). This revised pedagogical approach, which plays a key role in integrating early learning and care in a number of European countries (for example, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries), helps early childhood educators support early learning and care in ways that are consistent with how children learn and develop.

5.0 Integrating child care and early education in Canada

In the last few years, Canada has seen a rise in efforts to integrate child care and kindergarten and more broadly³ care and early education. The OECD's 20 nation thematic review of ECEC (2004) recommended that Canada 'build bridges' between child care and kindergarten; conceptualize and deliver care and education as one seamless program; and vest responsibility for ECEC in a single department in each province/territory. And while these recommendations are far-reaching, require significant change, as well as a rethinking of the public and private responsibilities for early learning and care, a number of provinces have begun to work towards some measure of integration (Beach, 2010).

Six provinces/territories have moved child care services into ministries of education;⁴ six provinces have full-day kindergarten for five year olds⁵ and most have made some progress in developing curriculum frameworks or guides for child care programs; although none extend these frameworks to kindergarten and only New Brunswick's is mandatory. The 'clear vision for children', 'coordinated policy frameworks', 'coherent and participatory policy development', and 'strong and equal partnership' between child care and education envisioned by the OECD have not yet materialized, however; and may not, as provinces/territories chart their own courses for change with no over-arching federal role.

³ See, for example, Friendly and Prentice, 2009; Colley, 2003; Coalition of Child Care Advocates of British Columbia, 2011

⁴ Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Nunavut and the NWT

⁵ Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia. Ontario also has FDK for four year olds.

Prince Edward Island, Ontario and British Columbia have each recently produced proposals for significant changes in how they approach ELC. In the first two these comprise recommendations in expert reports commissioned by the respective provincial governments, with some measure of implementation. The third, developed by community ECEC stakeholders in BC, has been endorsed by community organizations but not taken up by the provincial government. A brief summary of these efforts illustrates how interests in, and work towards, integration is developing in different regions of the country. It also reveals some of the challenges of introducing change.

Prince Edward Island's Preschool Excellence Initiative

Beginning in 2010, Prince Edward Island (PEI) undertook an extensive overhaul of its child care and kindergarten programs. The PEI changes were based on a government-commissioned report and province-wide consultation on principles, purposes and options (Flanagan, 2010).

The *Early Years Report* recommended:

- A new *Early Years Act* to cover all ECEC programs;
- Moving all ECEC into the Ministry of Education with expanded government planning, support, curriculum, data collection;
- Full-school day kindergarten for all five year olds operated by school boards;
- Publicly funded Early Years Centres (EYCs) for 0-4 year olds operated by mandated quasi-public local structures developed using a public planning process⁶;
- Moving towards more publicly-managed and not-for-profit services;
- ECE training for all ECEC staff/teachers in child care and kindergarten;

⁶ Initially, the EYCs could be either non-profit or for-profit but had to agree to meet a series of criteria in addition to licensing, such as using the provincial salary scale and parent fee, unit funding, curriculum framework, provide infant spaces and include children with special needs. Some existing centres either chose not to apply to become an EYC or didn't meet the criteria. After the initial EYC complement was in place, new for-profit centres were not eligible to become EYCs.

- A common curriculum framework across all ECEC (child care and kindergarten);
- Provincially-set parent fees;
- Province-wide salary scale negotiated with the provincial Early Childhood Development Association;
- A unit funding model combining set parent fees, fee subsidies and operational/base funding.

The report also recommended improved wages, expanded infant child care, mechanisms for community involvement and enhanced ECE training opportunities for all personnel (Flanagan, 2010). In 2010, the provincial government announced that they would move forward with the full recommendations with substantially increased funds included in the 2010 provincial budget:

- Full-day kindergarten (public education) began in September 2010;
- Kindergarten teachers have early childhood diplomas and will, with provincial help, gain teaching credentials as well;
- The first Early Years Centres (36) were announced at the end of the summer of 2010; in 2012, there are more than 40 EYCs;
- A new *Early Years Act* and regulations have been developed, publicly consulted on, and are expected soon;
- A new *Early Years* curriculum framework is expected soon;
- The province-wide salary scale and parent fees, and unit funding are in place;
- The provincial government has collected baseline data on child care staff.

All kindergarten and Early Years services (child care) are now under the aegis of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Financial commitments to the plan were maintained in 2012 albeit with some cutbacks announced in the spring provincial budget.

Ontario's full-day early learning initiatives

Ontario's most recent ECEC initiatives around integration began with the governing Liberals' commitment to introduce full-day learning in the 2007 provincial election campaign. An appointed Special Advisor was tasked with developing an implementation plan and, following extensive community consultation, his report was released in June 2009. The report recommended:

- Moving child care into the Ministry of Education, to an Early Years Division;
- Introducing 'Full-day Early Learning programs' for all four and five year olds, with each classroom augmented by a school-board provided extended day (with a user fee) to meet parents' work schedules year round;
- Full-day Early Learning taught by certificated teacher and registered ECE "teams";
- A new municipally-managed child and family service system for children aged 0 – 3 years, with publicly-operated and nonprofit Best Start Child and Family Centres forming the basis of the system;
- After-school programs for children up to age 12 delivered by school boards;
- Reorganizing funding, staffing, and existing programs to turn elementary schools into 'neighbourhood hubs' for children and families operating from 7 AM until 6 PM year round.

The provincial government chose a phased-in approach to change, starting with a five year plan to implement full day kindergarten (FDK) for all four and five year olds. The other program components (*Best Start* Child and Family Programs, after-school programs) of the proposed integrated ECEC system were put on hold despite stakeholder concerns that the report's recommendations would prove most effective if implemented as a whole rather than as separate initiatives.

The Full-day Early Learning program, re-named full day kindergarten (FDK), includes a number of integrative elements:

- Within FDK classrooms, certificated kindergarten teachers and registered early childhood educators work together to implement a new program for the full school day;
- The program uses a revised curriculum, *The Kindergarten Program*, integrating elements of Ontario's optional child care curriculum framework *Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT)*;
- Amendments to the provincial Education Act legislated local school boards' role in providing FDK. Integrated extended day programs for four and five year olds are optional, with nonprofit community-based providers delivering after-school programs for four and five year olds;
- An Early Years Division was established in the Ministry of Education to oversee the implementation of FDK and take on full responsibility for all regulated child care.

FDK has been generally well received and is on its way to full implementation by 2014. The other elements have proven more challenging. Plans for implementing *Best Start* Child and Family Centres and after-school programs remain at a developmental stage. The extended day concept has raised operational challenges with the envisioned 'seamless' program proving difficult to implement. As a result, the provincial government has returned to the previous model enabling nonprofit third party operators to deliver the outside-school-hours portion of the service for four and five year olds.

The move to FDK has also impacted on the stability of regulated child care programs for children under four years. Despite some stabilization funding to offset the lost revenue as four and five year olds moved into FDK, the regulated child care sector indicates that it continues to face significant challenges (City of Toronto, 2011). These issues highlight the fragile nature of many child care programs as well the challenges of integrating services one step or type of service at a time (Quality Early Learning Network, 2012).

British Columbia's Community Plan for a Public System of Integrated Early Care and Learning

The third recent Canadian ECEC integration proposal comes from British Columbia's ECEC community. In 2008, the government of British Columbia conducted a feasibility study regarding the introduction of full-day learning programs for three, four and five-year olds. The province began phasing in full-day kindergarten in 2009, which is now in place throughout the province. Similar programs for three and four-year olds have not been introduced.

In light of the above, the Early Childhood Educators of BC and the Coalition of Child Care Advocates, through an extensive consultation process, proposed a community plan for transforming ECEC in the province. The plan outlines three linked elements:

- An *Early Care and Learning Act* that enshrines as rights: integrated 'care and learning' services for 0-5 year olds; before- and after-school care for 6-12 year olds; access to quality, affordable care for families; support and inclusion for vulnerable children and those with special needs; control of their own ECEC services for Aboriginal communities;
- A new home for early care and learning in an Early Care and Learning Division of the Ministry of Education providing: universal entitlement for all children (age five and up under the *BC Schools Act*, 0 - 5 year olds under the new *Early Care and Learning Act*); public funding, with parent fees, for early care and learning;
- New role for boards of education which extend to the development, planning, governance and support of early care and learning in schools and community settings, in collaboration with municipal governments and the child care community.

These proposals have not been provincially adopted.

6.0 Integration in early learning and care: Summing up

The recognition that care and education are "inseparable concepts and that quality services for children necessarily provide both" (OECD, 2001, p. 14; OECD, 2006) highlights the importance of integrating services, in some measure, and provides jurisdictions with a call to rethink how they might best approach ELC. The integration of existing services is complex, however, with much still not fully decided in how to implement change and the final forms integration might best take.

Nevertheless, there is much that can be learned from different efforts at integration to both spur and guide future work. Despite the challenges of generalizing across settings and studies (Penn et al 2004), there is some evidence that integrating services can support positive outcomes for children, especially children who live in at-risk families, and that an early age of entry to integrated services provide benefits for both children and families. And while studies of integration stress the importance of context, the need to take into account national, regional and cultural differences, and that there is not an overall 'one size fits all' solution, they generally conclude that the most fully integrated model, exemplified by the Nordic regimes 'has worked rather well' (Cohen et al, 2004: 201).

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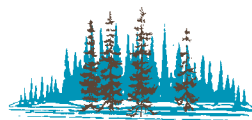
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