

From Market to System: A report from the mini-plenary



By Shellie Bird

“How do we move from child care as a market commodity to child care as a system that treats child care as a public good?” As the title of this mini-plenary suggests, the focus of discussion was on what constitutes a “child care system” compared to what we have in Canada today. Panelist and participants considered how and why a market approach to child care creates barriers to building a quality, accessible system of services for families and children.

Market forces at play

Participants talked about what is meant by the “market” and how market forces, of supply and demand, determine how services develop. Strictly speaking the “market” is where buyers and sellers interact as individuals to trade goods and services, and contract for money or barter (www.businessdictionary.com). When the care and education of young children is treated like a commodity for purchase, like a box of cereal or tube of toothpaste, market relations, market incentives, price levels and competition drive supply. It is these market forces that determine when and where programs get located, their purpose and who they serve; not the needs of families, children or the public good.

Within a market approach public discourse has come to focus on convincing governments that investments in child care create economic benefits; school readiness, life-long learning, and by reducing health and social welfare costs in later life.

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Using neuroscience, proponents seek to show that public investment in the early years will produce better brains and more economically productive citizens. This market approach focuses on individual achievement and reduces children to assets in terms of their value to the market. According to the Organization for Economic Development (OECD), the economic argument for investment has driven policy makers to design early intervention and spending patterns to gain “value for money” (OECD 2012 pg 3).

What the “marketplace” produced

Panelists and participants then explored how this market approach shapes the development and delivery of child care



Carolyn Ferns

services. When government takes the position that child care is a commodity to be sold in the market and its function is to provide regulation - planning for services is weak, short term and heavily reliant on private initiatives. It results in limited supply, inequitable access and uneven levels of service. High costs to parents, low pay for the ECE workforce and low quality are the order of the day. Regulation becomes a proxy for quality and choice limited to a few lucky families. Only about 20% of families are able to access licensed child care.

Left to market forces there is no policy framework, no long-term planning, no sustained funding, no stated principles, goals, targets or timetables. There is little public discourse about what kinds of services are needed, where they will be located and who they will serve. There is little debate about the different needs of children, families and what is in the best interest of society as a whole. There is little discussion about larger societal objectives of social cohesion and equality.

Understanding child care as a public good

What would it mean for Canada to reorient its approach away from child care as a market commodity to one where child care is understood as a public good, a shared benefit for the general well-being of citizens/residents?

A public approach would require an overarching national policy framework aimed at building full access to universal services. It would need to include shared principles, an accountability framework, robust service systems designed and administered by provinces/ territories with local management and planning. It would need to include public input. A well designed system

would be based on shared principles, best evidence and solid accountability. Based on the evidence, this is demonstrably the best way to ensure real options (“choice”) for families.

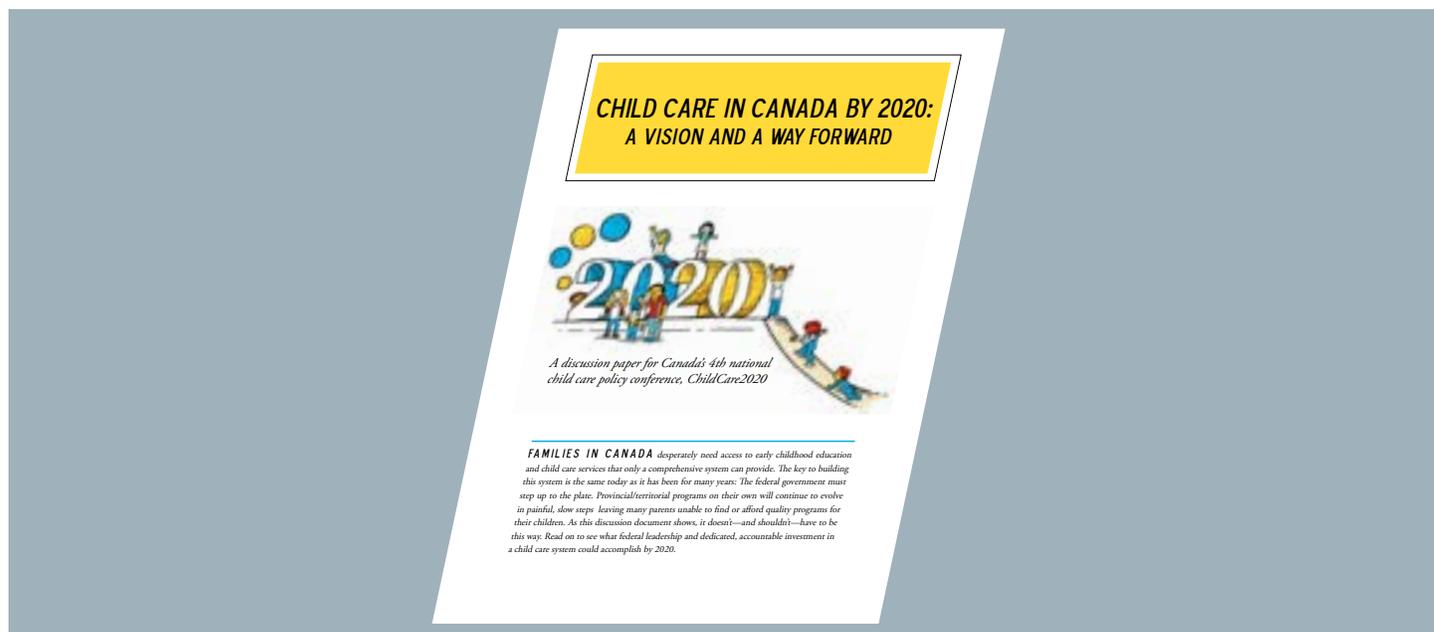
In a fully planned system child care would grow over time to include all children, regardless of families’ work status/ income/ region. It would offer a range of high quality services including parenting programs for parents, part-day nursery schools, centres and regulated home childcare. Services would be affordable, publicly-funded, publicly-managed, public/ not-for-profit and participatory and inclusive. Childcare would be part of a broader public policy including improved parental benefits and other family supports such as a national child benefit.

Participants were challenged to think beyond the market and the very limited choices it has to offer. They were challenged to re-think the notion that a fully public system would limit choice and create a one-size-fits-all.

And finally participants were challenged to think about what is possible when citizens/resident come together to demand something better. Canada’s health care system, pension system and public education were given as examples of what can be done when we work together to demand government take action in the interest of citizens/residents – for the greater public good.

Participants were encouraged to read the Childcare2020 Conference Vision Paper and to be a part of the public debate about child care; Child Care in Canada by 2020: A Vision and a Way Forward [http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3ENG .pdf](http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3ENG.pdf)

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Visions after ChildCare2020

By **Chanequa Cameron**
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Will Canada have a national child care program? This is a fundamental question being asked of policy maker today. It is also why constituents from across the nation gathered on Thursday November 13th, 2014 for the ChildCare 2020 conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The conference was a national call for all early learning and care (ELC) professionals and stakeholders across Canada to unite as one voice demanding essential rights for children in the early years. Canada should be proud of its multi-disciplinary ELC workforce, who work tirelessly to provide optimal care and quality learning experiences. However, Canada should also be ashamed of the working conditions, level of respect showed to early learning and care professionals and the absence of a national child care plan. It can be argued that Canada does have the resources available to invest in early learning to support a national plan. So if money is not the barrier to quality early learning and care for Canadian children, why the deplorable absence of funding?

Before the kick-off, I was prepared for the conference to change me intellectually and in my practice as an Early Childhood Educator. But I did not realize that it would change my life.

For over 30 years ELC professionals have been figuratively fighting - fighting with key policy makers to establish an effective early learning and care platform. Through conferences offered across Canada for decades, research has been produced to validate early learning and care as critical to fostering a better society in Canada. Investment in the early years proves to be a key indicator for future success. Respectfully, it also must be acknowledged that there is no early childhood education without the Early Childhood Educator. The united workforce of ECEs along with other stakeholders have been organizing into federations, councils, associations and colleges. These bodies remain non-partisan and embody similar missions, visions and campaigns. The most common theme within these driving forces is the vision to provide the best start for all children in Canada.

I felt compelled to attend ChildCare 2020, and was honored with the opportunity by the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF) for my role as a member council representative for the AECEO. Immediately after mingling at the CCCF's reception, I could feel an atmospheric change. There

was a strong presence arriving in Winnipeg and I anticipated a gathering of great minds from across Canada, internally chanting the same thoughts and hopes. Before the kick-off, I was prepared for the conference to change me intellectually and in

my practice as an Early Childhood Educator. But I did not realize that it would change my life. Many key stakeholders worked hard to both organize and facilitate this miraculous conference that offered outstanding speakers such as Stephen Lewis, Ken Dryden, Olivia Chow and Tom Mulcair as well as many panels, sessions, workshops and interest group meetings. I selected a workshop at the conference that asked participants to ponder the best ways to engage Canadians on the issue of child care. The session, facilitated by Trish Hennessy (founding director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), looked specifically at the ways in which the sector should craft our messaging about child care. Ultimately, the workshop assisted ECEs and other stakeholders in participating in critical dialogue about the challenges in



Olivia Chow and Ken Dryden

talking about early learning and care, the importance of "action language" and of sending the right messages. Most importantly the workshop suggested strategies for reaching Canadians who