

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a review of Berkeley sociologist Bruce Fuller's latest book *Standardized Childhood* and a commentary on Bill C-303, slated for its third and final reading on November 20 in the House of Commons.

Childcare mosaic or melting pot?

Standardized Childhood, a book by Berkeley sociologist Bruce Fuller discusses the questions Canadians aren't even asking

Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized Childhood*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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On November 20, Members of Parliament will debate at third and final reading Bill C-303, “[a]n Act to establish criteria and conditions in respect of funding for early learning and child care programs.” When the debate begins, it may sound as though they are debating child care. But they are actually discussing a thin sliver of what child care could be—the bill defines child care very narrowly, including only one rather exclusive form of institutional daycare. In spending so much effort discussing standardized government-run care, the question still remains: What is the role of parents and families in raising kids? Right now we are debating the creation of a system, not the care of our children.

This theme of balancing government institutions with parental desires is something Berkeley sociologist Bruce Fuller discusses at length in his recently published book, *Standardized Childhood*. He highlights the well-intentioned efforts of advocates for government standardized care, but ultimately worries that universal systems of child care will take parents out of the process. “I do worry that the push to universalize and standardize preschooling in America will disempower parents from the most essential human task of all: raising young children.” [1]



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Back to the garden

Once upon a time, says Fuller, philosophers took a “romantic developmental” approach to child care. In discussing the history of child care, Fuller leads us back into the garden—kindergarten, that is. Friedrich Froebel, a German naturalist, who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century, coined the term, writing, “Growing plants are cultivated in accordance with Nature’s laws, so here in our child garden, our kindergarten, shall be the noblest of all growing things...” [2]

Fuller references childcare activists who speak to a warm and unique learning environment, which lets the child lead, and others who he might call “institutional liberals,” who believe “more in the power of universal organizations such as common schools to raise and instruct young children.” [3] Activists of different stripes, however, end up compromising their ideals to make their programs more politically palatable.

In short, universal childcare programs are not particularly popular with parents, so activists need to marry the idea of early learning and care with other aspects that might sell it better to the electorate, and more importantly, to governing politicians, says Fuller. Thus they end up watering down well meant notions of a “garden of learning” by claiming economic benefits, and by demanding high academic standards of young and younger kids.

Might we end up moving from Froebel’s beautiful garden to Kafka’s bleak and frustrated world? “[G]overnment displays the Weberian habit of reducing complex strategies for organizational change down to simple, routinized solutions,” writes Fuller. “Somehow the political imperative of clear benchmarks and the regulatory mentality of central government squeeze out human discretion on the ground.” [4]

Creative research

Fuller furthermore thinks, in some cases, activists fudge research results to bolster their cause. He cites the Perry Preschool project as one example of a study that has taken on mythological proportions for its purported success. Perry Preschool began with children in poor families in Michigan in 1962. It was “an intensive, meticulously designed half-day preschool and home visiting program.” [5] Comparing the Perry Preschool group and the control group—which received no preschool or parenting education, Perry graduates “were about 20 per cent more likely to have graduated from college, less likely to have been arrested, and the girls experienced fewer pregnancies as teens.” [6]

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Today this study is still used as the guiding light for what good child care can do. However, there was only a half day of care outside the home and experts balanced this with home visits, including parents. The program cost US\$15,000 (in 2000 dollars) per child. [7] Furthermore, Fuller also writes, that “once we get past the press releases, we find that some differences are not statistically significant, apply only to girls, not boys, or fade away.” [8] Needless to say, these results are not a resounding endorsement of institutional preschool.

This type of creativity either with the research, or with reporting of research, is common. Take the recent headline: “Early start to daycare may keep at-risk toddlers’ aggression in check.” [9] Read the story through, however, and just 15 per cent of the children were attending a formal daycare setting, as in the kind Bill C-303 envisions happily dotting our countryside. “40 per cent were being cared for in a household setting by a non-family member, 30 per cent were in the care of a non-parental family member...The remaining 13 per cent received care in various other settings.” [10] In the end, fully 70 per cent of the kids in the study were cared for outside daycare centres, which entirely negates the headline message.

An elite push

The push for universal care in the United States, says Fuller, is a push from elites, and comes frankly, at the expense of parental input. “The new vanguard [of childcare activists] spends far more time poring over polling results and screening public service announcements than talking with parents about what they really want when it comes to raising their kids,” says Fuller. [11]

Parents haven’t quibbled with academic standards—but do complain about differing approaches to discipline. When teachers encourage kids to “reason and talk through social conflicts,” some parents, many from the Latino community, wonder why the child would not just be disciplined. [12] “This mother asked the teacher why she took no action against what she saw as outright defiance. But, she continued, ‘the teachers say it’s not a problem... that we can’t make him sit down if he doesn’t want to. In my country, they don’t let children do that.’” [13]

In short, it's not possible for one standard childcare system to incorporate every disciplinary approach, every cultural desire. All the more reason to include parents in the process, at the earliest stage.

Childcare mosaic versus melting pot

Canadians fancy themselves as taking a better approach to cultural assimilation, especially in comparison with the States; we are the cultural mosaic, they are the melting pot. We are more accepting of differences, so goes this line of reasoning; Americans expect adherence to a set of cultural norms. So where we might expect a certain appeal of universal child care in the United States, why are we so quick to take a melting pot approach here in Canada?

Fuller asks in his book for a more reasonable, longitudinal approach to child care. He asks that the United States not rush into new government programs that may be short on results and have a high cost. If we in Canada proceed with a bill that fails to account for parental desires, it's still not entirely clear those parties responsible won't pay for it at the polls when an election comes. It's not clear that Bill C-303 will receive the necessary funding even if it passes. But pass or not, we still need a real childcare debate in Canada.

[1] Fuller, p. xxii.

[2] Fuller, p. 35.

[3] Fuller, p. 33.

[4] Fuller, p. 65.

[5] Fuller, p. 192.

[6] *ibid.*

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Fuller, p. 193.

[9] Agrell, S. (2007, November 6). Early start to daycare may keep at-risk toddlers' aggression in check, *The Globe and Mail*, p. L3.

[10] *ibid.*

[11] Fuller, p. xv.

[12] Fuller, p. 91.

[13] Fuller, p. 15