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Child care: Research, quality, costs

A new book challenges the direction Ontario is going with universal programs for our youngest children

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Parents, politicians and policy makers converge on daycare like no other issue today.

In Ontario, this debate came up again when Charles Pascal, early learning special advisor to Premier Dalton McGuinty, released his report on June 15, 2009 on how to implement full-day kindergarten alongside other education reforms. Pascal suggests that universal public programs will help three and four year olds, and eventually, newborns to age three, with school readiness and better social outcomes. Pascal writes, "The science strongly indicates that if managed properly, a public policy commitment to improving children's development will have transformative social and economic effects." [1]

At roughly the same time as Pascal released his report, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University released an online book called *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut*. However, in stark contrast to Pascal, the author, Chester E. Finn Jr. suggests that universal publicly-funded programs are not the answer. He argues for targeted programs for disadvantaged children and further suggests the research on universal pre-school programs is mixed, while the cost benefits and long term societal outcomes are limited. [2]

There's a candour in Finn's writing—take for example how he highlights that social science research can and frequently is used toward ideological ends. "Indeed, preschooling painfully illustrates the discouraging epigram about education research (and much else in social science): if you tell me what conclusions you'd like, I can point you to a study that meets your needs. This circumstance alone should caution readers against succumbing quickly to anything that claims to be a consensus of research in this field. Discord reigns." [3]

Discord does reign. The research showing benefits of institutional early learning for very young children is indeed mixed. All too frequently in child care research, small and targeted studies are held to have broad universal application. [4]

Then there's the question of quality. All advocates for universal care highlight the need for high quality care. Here, Finn makes the point that in a system where education from kindergarten through to grade 12 is failing students, how might we guarantee that tacking on an additional grade will be any different? [5] He further highlights how measuring quality in these programs tends to be a nebulous affair. "...[A]ssessment in this domain is underdeveloped and heavily disputed, because many early-childhood educators care more about non-cognitive elements of child development and because (as in K-12 education) existing providers are loath to be judged by the results of their efforts." [6] Why then the heavy rhetorical emphasis on "early learning" and "closing achievement gaps"?

On closing gaps, Finn maintains a substantial concern about school readiness and gaps between kids. Yet he argues that the solution is targeted programs. "When gap-closing is really the goal, a so-called universal program is almost never the best way to get there." [7]

Ontario is currently positioned to go down the universal pre-kindergarten road, without acknowledging the myriad of policy options outside a universal publicly-funded system, perhaps due to well-meant intentions, perhaps due to the stranglehold that unions have on public education in Ontario or perhaps of a desire for the Ministry of Education to keep jobs at a time when demographic decline is writing their pink slips. Money for parents—a provincial extension of the UCCB might be one option, family taxation another.

"Which children need [preschool]? How many aren't getting it? Who should provide it—and at whose expense? What's the right balance between socialization and systematic instruction? Between education and child care? ...What are reliable markers of quality in preschool programs?" [8] These are the questions with which Finn begins his book. Still, it's his final point that is most compelling. "[M]ajor-league success for kids depends on family and community as well as government. Where families are strong and capable, less hinges on either school or preschool. Where families are weak and communities fractured, government must do more." [9]

How to strengthen families first so that government need not do more, lies at the heart of this debate. Reports that consider early learning programs in schools before examining how to help parents directly are missing the point entirely. One is reminded of the Chesterton quote about those who would cut off a natural force and substitute a paid bureaucracy: "You are like a lunatic who should carefully water his garden with a watering-can, while holding up an umbrella to keep off the rain." [10]

Endnotes

- [1] Pascal, C. (2009, June 15). With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario. Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 10. Retrieved July 14, 2009 from <http://www.ontario.ca/earlylearning>
- [2] Finn, C. E. (2009, June 6). *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut*. Education Next, Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Retrieved July 14, 2009 from <http://www.hooverpress.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=1346>
- [3] Finn, p. 43.
- [4] The High/Scope Perry Preschool study is frequently cited to bolster claims that early intervention in children works. This intervention was targeted, however, at 123 children and therefore can't be applied to the entire province of Ontario. Information about the study can be found at <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>
- [5] Finn, p. 14.
- [6] Finn, p. 31.
- [7] Finn, p. 15.
- [8] Finn, p. ix.
- [9] Finn, p. 98.
- [10] Clipper, L.J., Thompson, J.J., Brangwyn, F., Marlin, G., Rabatin, R.P. Swan, J.L., (Editors). (1986). *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, The Drift from Domesticity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.