

Productivity Commission

Review of Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

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Charles E. Pascal
University of Toronto

Background

Over the past four years, I have been very fortunate to have worked with and learned from Australian leaders in government, practitioners in early learning and care, and experts from universities and civil society.

I remain very impressed with the extent and variety of innovation in the early years sector in Australia and am pleased to provide some preliminary observations informed by both my experience in Australia and experience and knowledge gained from other jurisdictions including my work in Canada.

Your issues paper provides a very thorough framework for discussion; that said, this brief commentary will only focus on a few key areas. I will be in Australia at the end of February and early March with hope that I might expand on these initial thoughts and respond to other issues you may wish to explore with me. I am attaching my mini-bio to assist you in placing my comments in context.

Quality

There is a good deal of research regarding the economic and social return on the early learning investment. Naturally, quality is key. Fortunately, there is much evidence on quality that is based on sound research methods. There is, as well, some “evidence” derived from poor research design. Distinguishing between the two is critical. Naturally, the discourse about quality early learning is also ripe with opinion-driven polemics that are not helpful in advancing conversations about what constitutes both good policy and practice.

Therefore, at times, the quality discussion is greeted with skepticism and dismissive reactions that there is no agreement regarding its key factors. So why bother? The big research challenge is to avoid “fruit salad” comparisons in which apples are compared with oranges that yield equivocal results. Studies of studies that fail to control for the length of the program, the skillset and credentials of educators, staff/child ratios/the pedagogical approach used with young children, the nature of the learning environment and the like, will generate useless results at best.

As I noted, there is excellent evidence that *does* support key indicators of quality. It is a well-known given, for example, that early years staff qualifications that provide a high level of pedagogical skill and understanding of early human development, is a must. So is the level of child/staff ratios that allow and encourage the educator’s ability to adapt to the individual differences and needs of each child. Is there more work to be done regarding defining and assuring quality? Yes, but the notion that we do not have an idea regarding key elements that define quality programming is likely driven by ideology or misunderstanding. The following report from the OECD might be helpful in this regard:

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/startingstrongiinearlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>

The thoughtful *Starting Well* research published by the Economist Intelligence Unit is also helpful:

http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/publications/sw_report.pdf

Also please see this article that summarizes the trends in early childhood education that includes all of the key elements required for a whole systems approach to quality with strong reference to the OECD work:

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/UserFiles/File/Publications/TrendsinEarlyEducationandChildCare_Jul2012.pdf

And a more extensive listing of quality assessment commentary and tools:

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Resources/Topics/Assessing_Quality/index.html

It is critical that we take advantage of the best research available and move forward to support ongoing efforts to evaluate the impact of early learning on the development of children, the dynamics of family and the social and economic health of our communities. As well, we need to continue to ensure our approach to research and evaluation of quality deals increasingly more with outcomes, including the more complex in addition to input and process variables. In my view, we need a research and evaluation approach that populates the cells in the following sample framework:

Information > Action

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- | | Input | Process | Outcomes |
|---|----------------------------------|---------|----------|
| ▪ | How is my child doing? | | |
| ▪ | How is the family doing? | | |
| ▪ | How is the program doing? | | |
| ▪ | How is the system doing working? | | |
| ▪ | How is the community doing? | | |
| ▪ | What's the societal impact? | | |

Regarding “societal impact”, I am referring to what commonly refers to social and economic impact. It is in the intersection between these kinds of action research questions and outcomes that more work needs to take place. From my perspective, when it comes to both focus and high impact, early learning and care programs should focus on a few high impact outcomes. From my examination of evidence-based curricula, enabling the *self-regulation of young children*—the ability to govern oneself and adapt to new and difficult situations in a resilient manner, is an excellent candidate for focus. Naturally other outcomes are important, but self-regulation is key in terms of longer term abilities to problem-solve, risk-taking, and learning from failure. In the following recent radio documentary, the work of Dr. Stuart Shanker is highlighted. Dr. Shanker was West Australia’s “thinker in residence” in 2012:

<http://www.cbc.ca/thesundayedition/documentaries/2013/12/01/draft-documentary-how-is-your-engine-running/>

And a reference to Dr. Shanker's new book, *Calm, Alert and Learning*:
<http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/self-regulation-calm-alert-and-learning>

As well, we need research our research! The easily measured is often not worth measuring. More attention and resources are required to develop more effective ways of measuring these more complex outcomes.

While seeking clarity and consensus regarding "quality" based on sound research is critically important so is the need to assure its presence in all of the variations of non-parental early years programming. In this context, there is a good deal of admiration in other jurisdictions for Australia's National Quality Framework and its associated assessment and review processes.

As the NQF implementation unfolds over time, with lessons learned about how to improve the information generated to inform constructive and welcomed opportunities to impact "quality", the NQF has the potential to lead the world in country-wide quality assurance. This is truly a nation-building opportunity that over time can build and improve on its current minimum standards and ensure that the learning and development of Australian's youngest children rises accordingly, yielding an ever -growing return on the Government's investment.

Implementation of the NQF is still in its infant stage, and needs to be nurtured and studied for these improvements to become second nature and continuous. Patient but rigorous formative evaluation is required. Those of us outside of Australia will be learning along the way with keen interest and in my case, a bit of envy!

Also of interest is the well-known EPPE study from the U.K. that deals with many of the quality issues including the importance of longitudinal research:

<http://www.ebooks-share.net/early-childhood-matters-evidence-from-the-effective-pre-school-and-primary-education-project/>

Here is a reference to a recent symposium we held on measuring quality to continue our learning about how to improve assessment systems:

[http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Events/2013 Events/Defining Using Evaluating Quality Assurance In Early Childhood Education.html](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Events/2013%20Events/Defining%20Using%20Evaluating%20Quality%20Assurance%20In%20Early%20Childhood%20Education.html)

High quality early learning and care *will* make the impact difference that good research has shown. Low quality will not. An effective and transparent assessment system that notes progress along the quality pathway is critical to moving closer to the level of impact sought and needed. The NQF and NQS are exemplars of the kind of national approach that will have significant local impact for children and their families.

Economic Impact

The economic return on the early years' investment is well documented and I include a few references within this section and attach a few others at the conclusion of these comments. But it must be emphasized that some equivocal findings abound because of inconsistent definitions of quality and/or inconsistent delivery implied in the previous note on quality. Consistent high quality pedagogical and curriculum support for the development of young children is key as are other elements of quality early learning and care. One of the most helpful contributions regarding the return on early human development investment have been made by Dr. W. Steve Barnett at Rutgers University. Dr. Barnett is well known and highly

regarded for his longitudinal economic impact work. Here is a brief interview of Dr. Barnett:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcZqHlVhjpU>

Naturally, a key economic driver regarding any jurisdiction's productivity is the participation of a well-qualified and adaptive workforce.

The Commission's issues paper calls attention to Australia's participation rate of women in the labor market. There is certainly a good deal of room for improvement. The relationship between high quality non-parental supports and labor market participation is well documented. The work of economist, Dr. Pierre Fortin, calls attention to Quebec's childcare program and the rise of female participation in the workforce that, in turn, generates tax revenue that pays for the program. Please see the following:

<http://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/06/quebecs-child-care-scheme-pays-itself-economist>

Please see the addendum for the original report from Fortin along with an economic analysis of our early learning efforts in Ontario.

In promoting the kind of "all hands on deck" notion of human capital required for a healthy and flexible workforce and robust economy, it is useful to look at the human development side of the coin. The Commission's issues paper makes reference to AEDI results that call attention to an average of more than 20% of children entering the formal education system with challenging vulnerabilities, well behind their peers. Many of them never catch up.

In Ontario, before we initiated full day learning, this vulnerability rate was 27%. The following references refer to recent and preliminary research in Ontario that shows very promising, albeit preliminary results in lowering this rate. If the trend noted in these results hold up, the impact on both human development and economic return will be significant. It

should be noted that the key to these results to date illustrate the importance of a dedicated effort to ensure high quality pedagogical application of an evidence-based curriculum in a consistent manner across thousands of full day learning centers. The effort to provide in-service training to early learning professionals and others to ensure a high level skill set is absolutely critical. “Quality” does not take place because a curriculum document is made available. Implementation requires a focused and sustained effort in supporting appropriate skills development “on the ground” and efforts to increase the quality of credentials offered by those who train early years professionals.

See here the initial and promising impact results from the Ontario “experiment”.

Preliminary Research Results on Impact of Ontario’s Full-day Kindergarten, September 2013:

[News Release](#)

[Toronto Star Feature](#)

[Backgrounder on the Research](#)

[Graphs Depicting Results](#)

Research sponsored by the Business Council of British Columbia notes that for every 1% drop in this vulnerability rate, a 1% increase to the GDP will accrue as a result over the working life of each 1% no longer vulnerable.

See:

<http://journal.cpha.ca/index.php/cjph/article/view/2132>

If we can reduce the AEDI vulnerability rate through high quality early child development, this will lead to higher graduation rates in high school that in turn increases the participation rates in post-secondary education that provides the springboard to the supply side of human capital for the labor market. Ontario's experience is showing promise in this regard. Its early years vulnerability is going down; high school graduation rates have increased from 68% to 84% in eight years (due to early learning and other significant interventions); and post-secondary participation and graduation rates have risen to the highest in the OECD community.

There is also a case to be made that there is a correlation between a jurisdiction's birth rate and the quality of, and accessibility to, quality non-parental early years supports. See the OECD report, *Babies and Bosses*:

<http://www.oecd.org/els/family/babiesandbosses-reconcilingworkandfamilylifeasynthesisoffindingsforoecdcountries.htm>

This chart summarizes much of the economic return results categories.

Early learning makes BIG economic sense

Employment multiplier

- Early Learning highest employment multiplier (job creator) of all economic sectors - 43.5% more than the next highest ranking industries

Economic Multiplier

- Spending on Early Learning has an economic multiplier effect on local economies, generating up to \$1.7 dollars for every \$1 spent

Investment Payback

- 2:1 to 17:1 payback on public funding for developmentally enriched early learning program from increased taxes by working parents + reduced social services

GDP Growth

- GDP grows by almost 1% for every 1% drop in vulnerability rate going into grade 1. Over working life=20% jump in GDP, even after interventions to reduce vulnerability on front end

Benefits for all

- Effective early learning programs benefit all: Majority of vulnerable children – more than 60 % – live in moderate, middle-class and affluent families

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The Importance of Universality

Regarding the evidence concerning vulnerability of children entering the formal system of education, the evidence in Ontario and elsewhere is that a majority of these children are NOT from low-income homes; rather they are from moderate or affluent families. The discussion regarding “universality” versus “targeted” investment in early learning and care is a false dichotomy. Targeted programs rarely work and/or are not sustained politically. Universal programs provide an umbrella of support for all children including those who are vulnerable due to learning disabilities and other challenges other than poverty.

The most promising approach is a universal platform with special initiatives for low-income families, aboriginal children and others who are disadvantaged through no fault of their own. While Nobel laureate James Heckman concludes that it's best to focus on poor children, in my view, he moves from his excellent and important research to a pragmatic conclusion

about what an American policy tradition will yield. A targeted approach will simply miss too many children and will not be sustained by the electorate. Dr. Barnett's research and longitudinal work provides convincing support to the universality policy platform:

<http://investinginkids.net/2011/08/26/steve-barnetts-powerpoint-on-recent-findings-from-early-childhood-studies/>

Keeping in mind the earlier reference to increasing the economic value of increasing the labor market participation of women, universality is obviously a critical driver.

The importance of Coherent and Integrated Public Policy Making

Australia, like so many nations dealing with domestically driven fiscal and Global economic challenges, must determine the best way forward in choosing among priorities. Often, these priorities are considered as “competing” choices. In a forced choice environment, organizations—both public and private—should opt for the notion that is wiser to do *fewer things better, rather than all things less well*. Naturally, in a transparent political environment, determining the strategic areas of focus for investment is challenging.

In my view, the key question for any government should be:
What policy and program areas have the likelihood of having the largest impact on the health, safety and prosperity of its citizens?

In this sense, what appear to be competing choices can evaporate if governments can connect the dots, and communicate effectively, on how an investment in one area can actually advance progress in other areas. Governments often suffer from what I deem “hardening of the categories”. We often talk about “social *and* economic” policy or programs. The word

“and” acts as a bifurcated and unhelpful wall when it comes to thinking in more integrating and coherent ways when it comes to policy-making.

Even within the same policy sector such as education we do not do enough policy and structural change to ensure a truly seamless human development continuum of learning from pre-school through post-secondary. While some governments have attempted to place all elements of the education/learning continuum in a single department, even within this structure, the seams are all too evident. The narrative is often about how to manage “transitions” along the way rather than operating from an assumption based on the need to totally eliminate transitions.

The well-known Gonski report has much to commend it. It’s emphasis on access and equity, capacity building regarding leadership for improved schooling, and new funding models are all important. What’s missing from the Gonski report is the impact that the first 2000 days of a child’s life has on the formal schooling challenges and remarkable opportunities. Learning for life, developing both the skills for, and love of, learning, identifying and setting in motion interventions for learning challenges that might inhibit a successful trajectory, all begin in advance of formal schooling. Governments that include early learning as a key part of their education departments have taken good first steps. But more, much more is needed.

Ensuring there is truly national system to ensure quality *and* access to early learning for *all* children must be a priority. Exploiting these structural changes to truly develop and implement a learning-for-life plan is more challenging than moving the boxes around in an organization chart. While the national role should provide the guiding quality framework, it falls to the state level to ensure that there is coherent and integrating

governance that delivers universally available early learning that connects seamlessly with formal schooling.

When it comes to deciding about what the focus for governments in a forced-choice environment should be, perhaps it is useful to call attention to three major reports from my jurisdiction of Ontario. Over the past decade, a major report on poverty reduction, a major commission on youth violence reduction and a seminal report on future economic prosperity shared one common number one priority---investment in high quality early learning. These references are noted here:

Ontario Reports on Early Years Investment Impact

Youth Violence:

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/youthandthelaw/roots/introduction.aspx>

Future Prosperity/Economic Return

http://ccednet-rcdec.ca/files/ccednet/Faris_supplement.pdf

Poverty Reduction

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/index.aspx>

This link is to the report only:

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/report/index.aspx>

As I noted in my report to our Premier, another key complementary policy driver to effective early years and care programming, is parental leave. An effective parental leave plan allows mothers to be omnipresent at the outset of a child's life for reasons of attachment and the critically

important opportunity for breastfeeding. A good plan also includes accommodation for non-birthing parents to have work leave as well.

The Ontario blueprint, *With Our Best Future in Mind*, aspired to provide a case study in whole system change that situates early learning and care in the context of children and family services more broadly along with implementation plans.

<https://www.ontario.ca/education-and-training/early-learning-report>

Whether one looks at the human capital supply required for a robust and flexible labor market or its flip-side need for healthy human development both for economy and for the effective participation in a civil society, it is difficult to locate evidence that supports a more promising priority for a return on the tax dollar than early child development and the policy drivers that support it.

Coherent and strategic policy-making requires an uncommon understanding of how focusing on a few integrating priorities can have a major impact on the progress of a nation. A major quality early learning and care initiative needs to be understood as a short, medium and long term investment rather than an annualized cost.

Of course focusing on a few high horizontal impact areas requires reducing and redirecting resources in other areas. I have discussed the challenge of “hardening of the categories” that reinforces the silo effect that makes tough and smart choices difficult. “Short-termism”—making simplistic decisions regarding complex challenges for shorter horizon political gain--also challenges governments when it comes to reducing expenditures in many areas to support a few high impact “horizontal” choices. The result of avoiding the longer view of impact and choosing instead to reduce expenditures “equitably” across the board, results in “doing all things less well.” What I have described here is the “road less

travelled” (with credit to poet Robert Frost). This pathway takes uncommon courage and exceptional communication efforts to explain to stakeholders and the public at large the tougher but smarter choices.

Improving Key Partnerships for Change

Developing initial policies that are strategically wise and evidence-based is hard enough. Effective implementation and excellent ongoing research and evaluation that both sustains and improves on the investment, requires a vastly improved model of partnerships.

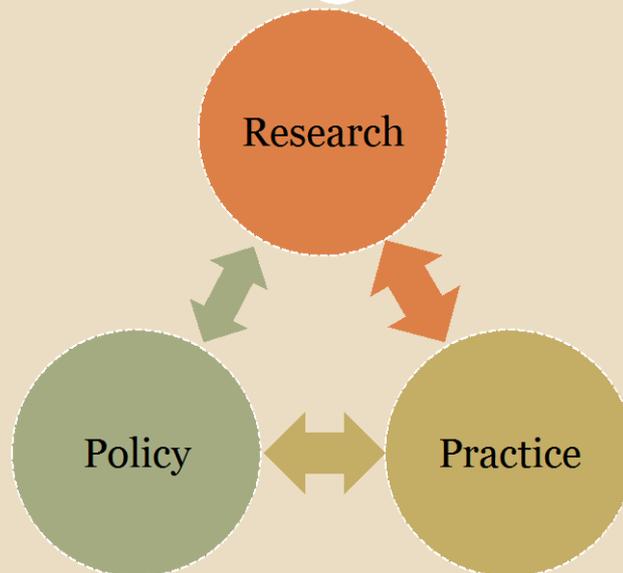
In this regard, I want to emphasize that we need to further develop the relationships among and between the following sector leaders for sustainable high quality impact going forward:

- **the practitioners**, the professional early learning educators and other professionals in the early childhood development “sector”;
- **the researchers**, those academics whom we rely on to provide important evidence to guide programming and policy decisions;
- and finally **the policy-makers** who need to be informed about both practice and evidence to make the right decisions about sustainable resourcing to make it all happen...now and in the future.

I have worked in the cultures of the three legs of the “impact” model depicted here.

The wonderful dance of research, practice & policy

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Those who work in our universities are rewarded for research deemed excellent through peer review, not by what practitioners or government policy makers think about their research. Those who work in the public service often work in anti-intellectual environments where the amount of money spent on research to inform policy can be slim or none! And those who deliver services such as early learning educators are generally not active users of the latest evidence...too busy delivering services.

The good news is that are examples of researchers who form genuinely reciprocal relationships with practitioners such as early learning educators, seeking their advice about what questions they would like a research project to answer.

In our work in Ontario, the professors involved in our research work also engage parents in this way. Naturally, this kind of partnership raises the practitioner's level of interest in paying attention to the research findings.

As well, unless an academic is a public policy professor, too many academics live with the mantra "if policy makers or practitioners pay attention to my work, fine, but not my problem."

While it's easy to make policy and much harder to make good policy, governments are not very good at implementation because they do not very often effectively involve practitioners—the ultimate implementers---in their policy making process at the beginning and continuously.

But we have also witnessed exceptions as well where policy makers and academics have also formed respectful and reciprocal relationships. I have witnessed some policy makers who have a more sophisticated and respectful approach to implementing policy by involving practitioners appropriately.

When those who work in these three cultures work together...the world changes...for the better. In my view, the effective development of each of these three professional clusters depends on the reciprocal relationships they have with the other two!

But do not forget the parents!

While I truly believe that the three-pronged partnerships among and between policy makers, evidence makers and practitioners is key, let's not forget that research has shown that the home environment has up to twice the impact on child development as high quality non-parental programming.

While some might ask, so “ since we don’t require a license to parent, why worry about credentials for early learning and care professionals?” I have already noted the well-known evidence regarding why qualifications for early learning professionals is vital; but it is equally critical to raise the issue of parental know-how regarding best family-based practice in supporting child development. So if a society cares about the maximum development of its human development and human capital, the important questions are naturally:

- How can we provide support to parents and guardians regarding developing their parenting knowledge and skills?;
- How can this support be equitable and effective and individualized?
- What can we do to ensure that the partnerships between parents/guardians and non-parental learning and care providers are trusting marked by effective communication and learning together about how to maximize this partnership for the sake of the children they “share”?

High quality early environments provide the local community-based footprint for these questions to be answered in developing effective, trusting and reciprocal relationships between parents and the early learning professionals. This relationship-embedded knowledge and skill development, in which providers and parents learn from one another, is one of the key reasons to invest in and nurture high quality, non-parental care “centres”.

Here is a summary of some resources and ideas regarding the challenge of improving the critically important parenting aspect of the quality equation:

<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/Resources/Topics/Parenting/index.html>

To summarize...for the moment

I hope these preliminary comments are useful. I have tried to focus on a few key areas recognizing that the Commission's issues paper reaches beyond my focus here. I should add, that as a researcher/policy person with experience in government, I am quite impressed with the Australian Productivity Commission concept and hope these preliminary comments are helpful to your important work. I very much look forward to an opportunity to discuss these and other issues with you in person in a few months when I am in Australia.

Charles E. Pascal
Professor of Applied Psychology and Human Development
OISE/University of Toronto.

Addendum

- Charles E. Pascal Mini-bio
- Full report on Quebec study by Fortin et al.
- Economic analysis of Ontario early learning plan