

Early learning and child care: A strategic investment

Martha Friendly
University of Toronto
St. John's October 31 2006



Overview of presentation

- Current thinking about ELCC
- Not only a strategic investment
- But certainly a strategic investment in women and children
- Under the right circumstances
- Early learning = Quality

Current thinking about ELCC

- Foundation of lifelong learning
“Countries should consider ECEC a public good, on a par with public education”
- Broader social and economic factors as well
 - ensuring labour supply
 - family well-being
 - social inclusion
 - child poverty

...OECD

Not ONLY a strategic investment

Two cultural ideas about children

- “Adult in waiting”
 - Successive developmental stages
 - Each stage preparation for next
 - Early childhood devalued for its immaturity yet necessary foundation for progress towards adulthood
 - Child defined as lacking, deficient, passive, incomplete
 - School readiness

...not only investment

- “Child as citizen”
 - Valuing early childhood as important in its own right
 - Not merely preparation for adulthood; here and now
 - Active learner, co-constructor of knowledge
 - Rights of the child - citizens with their own rights and needs
 - Broad preparation for life; foundation of lifelong learning

But **CERTAINLY** a strategic investment

“Consensus that first years of life are particularly important for cognitive, physical, social and emotional development... **the primary policy and program is early childhood education and care**
..Consensus today - **preschools are important for children** in order to stimulate development and learning and offer care and education in activities and relationships with a stable group of adults and peers outside the home”

Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel and Brookes-Gunn

A strategic investment – in children and in women

- Traditional cost-benefit analysis
- Calculates costs and benefits of universal publicly-funded ELCC – **All** 2-5 year olds
- Looks at effects on child development AND effects on mothers' labour force participation
- Conclusion: For every \$1 invested in ELCC, \$2 benefit to society

G. Cleveland and M. Krashinsky, U of T

But only under the right circumstances

- The cost-benefit is additive

That is, the benefit is calculated by assuming that the ELCC programs are set up so as to ensure that mothers can work AND so that child development is well supported

What are the “right” circumstances?

To be a strategic investment in women
(mothers)

Must be labour force sensitive

To be a strategic investment in children (future
labour force)

Quality matters

Early learning requires high quality

- “...the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children’s development that has been studied is **one of the most consistent findings in developmental science...**”

Quality...

- While child care of poor quality is associated with poorer developmental outcomes, high quality child care is associated with outcomes that all parents want to see in their children – ranging from cooperation with adults to the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, to early competence in math and reading”.

(Shonkoff and Phillips, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, US)

Research shows high quality is more likely if...

- Teaching staff have postsecondary ECE training (4 years)
- Teaching staff have salaries at high end of continuum
- Ratio of staff to children is “favourable”
- Not-for-profit operation
- Centre revenue is “higher”

High quality is more likely if...

- Director has high level of ECE training
- Teachers are self-reflective
- Organizational climate is positive
- Regulations are “stronger”
- Space is free or subsidized
- Approach to programming is planned, purposeful

High quality connections...

- Government funding other than fee subsidies > Better salaries
- Higher training requirements > Higher proportion of ECE staff >
- Not-for-profit auspice > higher salaries, higher training, positive centre climate
- Director has administrative training > positive centre climate
- Government financial assistance for ECE training > more ECE trained staff

Quality at the system level

- Quality at the program level comes from a strong system
- Conditions linked to quality operate as a whole (i.e., there is no magic bullet)
- Obstacles to ELCC quality are often structural – inadequate financing, unfavourable ratios, poorly qualified/remunerated staff, inadequate educational theory and poor implementation

A strong* ELCC *system*

...is the key to ensuring that high quality ELCC programs are the rule, not the exception.

*Well-designed, comprehensive, well-resourced

Conclusions - Key messages

- ELCC is a smart strategic investment in both the current and future labour force
- ELCC is a two-pronged benefit (mothers and children) but **ONLY** if it is done right
- A great deal is known about what “doing it right” means
- Canada isn't doing it

