

Canadian Alternatives in Early Childhood Programs

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Alternatives to traditional early care/education delivery options have developed in Canada in response to current needs of children and parents. The participative orientation of these alternatives enables a response to specific and changing local needs and accommodation to cultural, linguistic, educational and social characteristics of particular communities. Developed outside the traditional care/education policy and delivery structures, these alternatives face problems associated with this grass roots development (e.g., funds) and demand considerable personal commitment from the developers. However, these alternatives suggest the potential for partnerships among agencies and groups concerned with early care/education which, in turn, has implications for the role of the early childhood professional.

Des alternatives aux options traditionnelles de services de garde/éducation offertes au Canada ont été développées en réponse aux besoins actuels des enfants et des parents. L'orientation par-

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icipative de ces alternatives permet une réponse spécifique aux besoins changeants et à l'accomodation des communautés culturelles, linguistiques, éducatives, et caractéristiques sociales particulières. Ces alternatives, qui ont été développées en dehors des politiques traditionnelles des services de garde/éducation et des structures en place, font face à des problèmes associés au développement de ces racines (ex: fonds). Elles demandent un engagement personnel considérable de la part de ceux qui les développent. Cependant, ces alternatives suggèrent qu'il y a des associations possibles à établir entre des agences et des groupes concernés par les services de garde/éducation, lesquelles à leur tour ont des implications dans le rôle des professionnels de la petite enfance.

En Canadá se han desarrollado alternativas a la guardia tradicional y a las opciones educativas, en respuesta a las necesidades de los niños y de los padres. La orientación participativa de estas alternativas permite una respuesta a las necesidades locales específicas y cambiantes y la acomodación a características culturales, lingüísticas, educativas y sociales dentro de comunidades precisas. Estas alternativas enfrentan problemas asociados con el desarrollo de base (ex. fondos) al ser aplicadas fuera de las estructuras de política y de ejecución de la guardia/educativa tradicional, y exigen una dedicación personal considerable en las personas que las desarrollan. Sin embargo, estas alternativas sugieren una asociación posible entre agencias y grupos implicados con la guardia/educativa, la cual, a su vez, tiene implicaciones en el rol del profesional de la pequeña infancia.

As interest in the nurturing and educating of young children increases, many countries face a demand for more programs and services for more children. In Canada, the response to this demand has included both the extension of traditional services and the development of alternatives to traditional delivery options. These alternatives are a response to both budgetary restraints associated with funding for early education and care and needs not being met by existing programs and services. Three of these alternatives and their policy and practice implications are examined in this discussion.

The alternatives selected for examination are centre-based programs for urban Native Indians, employer-supported child care and parent-child (or family) centres. These three alternatives are distinguished by a common concern for the needs of parents and families as well as the needs of children. Each of these alternatives, however, represents a specific approach to accommodating both parent and child needs. The urban Native Indian centre reaches the parent through initial service to the child, whereas employer-supported child care reaches the child through initial accommodation of parent need; the parent-child centre addresses both parent and child

needs simultaneously in the same setting.

CENTRAL REGINA EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

Concern about Native Indian children's experiences in urban schools has resulted in the development of early education programs for these children and their families. This concern is particularly evident in Regina, a city with a large Native Indian population which is characterized by high levels of mobility, unemployment and other indicators of social stress. The Early Learning Centre, established in Regina in 1977, is representative of an initiative taken by an individual in response to particular needs of Native Indian children and parents. The development of the centre was initiated by a kindergarten teacher who was concerned that many urban Native Indian children were not able to cope with the elementary school situation. She noted delays in language development and other indicators of school readiness. Moreover, she sensed a general lack of understanding between the Native Indian community and the school. The combined efforts of this teacher, parents and the Native Indian community resulted in the establishment of this early learning centre.

Development of the Early Learning Centre

The Central Regina Learning Centre was begun with a group of ten pre-school children and the support of their mothers in the Fall of 1977 (Annual Report 1978, 1984). The first children were recruited by the teacher, now the Centre Director, by talking to children and, through them, meeting their

parents. Before the centre opened, a parents' workshop was held and the parents agreed to undertake various program and support responsibilities. Soon a waiting list developed and it was decided to hire a parent, open another class in the afternoon, and provide the parent with "on the job" training. That parent is now the senior associate teacher in the much expanded program.

The Centre Program

Two guiding principles were in evidence from the beginning: children's attendance was a shared responsibility and parent involvement was essential. By picking up children in a van and being "there" for the parents as well, staff would be responsive to parents as well as to children. In addition, as assistant teachers and teachers in the program, parents were to be helped in acquiring the confidence and skills they needed to become more effective parents and persons in their own right. The welfare of the children was and remains a central concern of the program.

Start-up donations from the Canadian Save the Children Fund, the Ursuline Sisters, the Catholic Church Extension Fund, the Kinsmen Foundation for the Handicapped, and various private sources made the first year possible. The Archdiocese of Regina and Native Indian groups, particularly the Tekakwitha Wickiup, endorsed the development of the centre. Negotiations with a social services agency resulted in more permanent basic funding for the second year. However, funding remains an ongoing problem requiring considerable staff time and attention.

Very early in the development of the program a Board of Directors was established with its members drawn mainly from the parent group. The

Board works closely with the Director, becoming involved in making plans, advising the Director and raising funds for specific activities such as swimming programs, parties and outings.

During the eight years of its existence, the centre has grown, moving from an apartment to small houses and, in 1984, to a former business building and the adjacent house. This move enabled the centre to expand from serving 12 to 14 children each half day in each house to an enrolment of 84 children with 110 on the waiting list. As numbers of children increased, the need for a family worker became acute and the position was added to the staff in September, 1984. The total staff now includes the Director, Senior Associate Teacher, five Associate Teachers, three van drivers, one secretary, a family worker, a janitor and one temporary teacher.

Because approximately 90% of the children served by the Early Learning Centre are of Native Indian ancestry, "every effort is made to give the child a sense of pride in her/his cultural heritage" (Brochure for parents). Instruction in the Cree language has been established as an integral part of the program. There is also an emphasis on Native story telling and crafts; however, the traditional stories, songs, poems and crafts of the broader Canadian society are not neglected. In the early stages of the program, there was an emphasis on helping to close developmental gaps, especially in the language area. There is a continuing concern about instruction, but the pervasive social-emotional needs of the children require and receive thoughtful and sensitive attention.

EMPLOYER-SUPPORTED CHILD CARE

As more mothers enter or re-enter the work force, there is an increasing need for child care for preschool-aged children. Employer-supported child care is one alternative for meeting the child care needs of these parents and children. More Canadian employers are examining the need of their employees within a family context; and one of these employee needs is often for the provision of child care.

Employer-supported child care can be defined as the participation of an employer (e.g. hospital, corporation, or voluntary organization) in the provision of child care for the children of the employees. This provision of child care can vary in type (e.g., on-site child care centres, information and referral services or flexible personnel policies) as well as in the degree of employer participation (e.g., provision of start-up costs, partial subsidy of operating expenses, provision of some services). Employer-supported child care is a relatively recent development in early childhood education across Canada with the first program established in 1964 at an extended care hospital in Toronto and the majority established during the past ten years.

Models of Employer-Supported Child Care

Canadian employer-supported child care is characterized by variety, which is evident in the sponsorship, reasons for establishment, size and ages of the children. Several models of programs have been developed (e.g., on-site centres, off-site centres, information and referral services, voucher systems, and slot-vendor programs); and within each

model, there can be a variety of programs. A brief overview of the on-site model illustrates this.

The on-site centre is the most frequent model of employer-supported child care in Canada (Grant, Sai-Chew, and Natarelli, 1982). The majority of these centres are affiliated with health care organizations which have been the leaders in the establishment of employer-supported child family care programs (Mayfield, 1985a). Other centres are affiliated with commercial businesses, government agencies, health facilities, heavy industries, high technology firms, and manufacturers. The number of employees ranges from fewer than 25 to more than 6,000 with the percentage of female employees ranging from less than 10% to more than 85%. The enrolments range from fewer than 20 children to more than 100.

The various initiators of these programs have included personnel officers, company presidents, union representatives, equal opportunity committees, elected officials, community day care professionals, and parents. In general, the establishment of these programs has resulted from a complex interaction of factors such as parents' child care needs, employer concerns, location, working hours, type of company or organization and local resources. These alternative programs were initiated to help meet parents' child care needs that were not being met by more traditional services. The following is a more detailed description of one of these programs.

A Consortium Program

The program of Edmonton Hospital Workers Child Care Society (Mayfield, 1985b) is a unique and innovative example of a consortium of three hospitals, the Alberta Hospital Association and

several hospital employee unions. In its place, the collective agreement from the 1980 contract negotiations between the United Nurses of Alberta and the Alberta Hospital Association provided for the establishment of a committee to examine the costs, benefits, alternatives and need for child care.

This committee's recommendations resulted in the establishment of the Edmonton Hospital Workers Child Care Society which includes all the parents whose children are enrolled in the society's programs and whose Board of Directors is responsible for the on-going operation of the three child care programs.

Consortium members provided the initial capital and start-up funds and appointed representatives to an Advisory Board which monitors the overall project, provides advice, and supervises evaluation of the programs. This two-tiered administrative organization has helped to avoid the inter-organizational conflicts and coordination problems that have troubled other consortia.

The day care centre program began in July 1982. It is located in an elementary school near three hospitals and is licensed for 60 children from 19 months to 6 years of age with priority enrolment given to the children of hospital employees (75% of the total enrolment are children of hospital employees). The program operates weekdays from 6:30 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. Funding for the day care centre comes from parents fees, the provincial operating allowance, funds from the family day home program and fund raising activities.

The family day home network was designed to meet the needs of employees with children younger than 19 months of age and those needing care on weekends, holidays, and during the evening or night shifts. This program, which began in Oc-

tober 1982, has 95 family day home providers caring for 207 children, more than 80% of whom are under age 3. Approximately 25% of the total enrolment is children of hospital employees, who are given priority. The program's home visitors provide support and resources for the family day home providers and the parents. Also, the family day home providers attend six two-hour training and information meetings a year.

The out-of-school program was begun in August 1984 to meet the need of supervised child care before and after school and during school holidays for children from 6 to 12 years. This program is licensed for 27 children and is located in another nearby school. It begins at 6:30 a.m. and includes lunch time supervision and after-school activities until 6:00 p.m.. A "summer camp" program designed to meet child care needs during the summer months includes centre-based and recreational activities.

PARENT-CHILD (FAMILY) CENTRE

Parent-child centres are concerned with parent and child needs in local communities across Canada. The objective of responding to community needs rather than to a particular design of program or service is what defines the parent-child (or family) centre. As a result, different patterns have emerged in different communities. This is not to say that there is no similarity among centres, e.g., "Drop-in" programs. The creation of parent-child centres represents a decided trend in early childhood education in the province of Ontario.

The Ontario Experience

The impetus for creating a centre originates as a rule with individuals concerned about some need(s) of children and parents within a community. School board and other social agency personnel as well as parents and other community residents have taken the initiatives resulting in centres with a high level of community orientation. Although frequently located in schools, centres have different relationships with local school boards, ranging from some sharing of space and/or equipment and communication between centre developers and school personnel to almost no contact or communication. Regardless of the kind of support received from schools or provincial agencies, decisions regarding programs and services remain with the community-based developers. Although early childhood professionals may be involved in planning and services, control of centre policy and operation usually rests with the initiating parent or community group.

The orientation to adult needs is another distinguishing feature of the parent-child centre. Although some form of parent education or involvement has been typically associated with early education, parent-child centres also address adult needs associated with other dimensions of family and community life. An appreciation of the parent-child centre concept is perhaps best achieved by a description of a highly developed centre providing multiple services (Regan et al., 1986). The centre selected for this purpose is the Syme Family Centre, described in its brochure as "... a child-parent drop-in education and resource centre".

The Syme Family Centre

The inter-agency group instrumental in this centre's development was composed of professionals from Metropolitan (Toronto) Children's Aid, Catholic Children's Aid, Metropolitan (Toronto) Community Services, Cradleship Creche, Public Health Department, City of York Community Services and City of York Board of Education. This group was motivated by a concern for those child and parent needs not being met by existing agencies and services in the community, e.g., child and parent needs arising from the social isolation experienced in certain home environments such as high-rise apartment buildings. It was believed that the lack of contact and play with other children contributed to difficulties for some young children when they entered school. Parents were seen as needing a place where they could meet and interact with other adults and where their children could find playmates.

In considering how these particular needs might be met, some members of the inter-agency group argued for a "community" rather than a "client" oriented response. Some of these professionals believed that community residents should be involved in any planning and decision-making directed at meeting their own needs. (How this evolved into the Syme Family Centre is detailed in Carniol, 1985.)

Early in the life of the centre, parents joined the inter-agency professionals on the planning committee and the centre has moved slowly but steadily toward community control and ownership.

The Syme Family Centre is located in a large classroom. Kindergarten equipment and supplies are provided by the City of York Board of Education and the centre is allowed to share, with the

school kindergarten, a nearby area where climbing equipment and wheeled toys are available for children. Some toys and other furnishings were purchased through grants from other agencies. However, a severe and persistent problem for the centre is securing funds needed for the Coordinator-Instructor's salary and other costs associated with maintaining the present level of services. Except for the time needed for periodic maintenance, the centre operates year round.

Originating as a weekly drop-in session for parents and children, the centre program gradually expanded to encompass several drop-in sessions each week, referrals to and from other community agencies (e.g., public health), maintenance of a registry of home day care providers, and a modest outreach program in an apartment building some distance from the centre. This is an effort to take the centre to parents and children unable, because of distance, to come to the centre. Through the home day care registry and the processing of other enquiries and referrals, the centre disseminates information about community programs and services and, as a result, is an important resource for the community.

Three years after the first drop-in session, it was estimated that between 150-200 families were making use of centre services. Drop-in sessions and activities related to these sessions represent the core or anchor of centre services and also serve as an opportunity to acquaint community residents with other centre services. Most of the day to day planning and coordination of activities rests with the Coordinator-Instructor, although policy and direction are set by the Centre Board.

Caregivers (family members, babysitters, home day care providers) as

well as parents, infants and preschoolers attend the 2 1/2 hour drop-in sessions. Because parents and caregivers are expected to assist and supervise during drop-in sessions, they have opportunities to meet and become acquainted with other adults in the community. In addition to providing the extra pairs of hands, their involvement is seen by the Coordinator-Instructor as an opportunity for the adults to develop skills in interacting with young children. Monthly parent meetings, field trips for children and adults, and special events such as seasonal and holiday parties are other popular features of the drop-in program.

Issues and Implications

Many planning and policy issues relate to the evolutionary and formative nature of these three alternative programs. Among these issues are the grass roots nature of the programs, the need for programs which meet specific local concerns, the need for financial supports, the role of early childhood professionals, and the inter-relationship of the program, community and school.

As a result of the participative orientation of these programs, these alternatives have the potential for responding to specific and changing local needs and concerns in ways not always possible in existing models. A strength of this participative orientation is the increased likelihood of the program accommodating, incorporating and utilizing the specific cultural, linguistic, educational or social characteristics of the local population. The Early Learning Centre is such an example. Programs which are "imported" without adaptation from another area have less likelihood of providing a "match" with local needs than do programs which can be originated at the local level.

The establishment of alternative programs requires a high level of commitment and risk on the part of a few individuals. The quality of commitment is difficult to sustain over a long period of time without systematic and stable support from the wider community. A dilemma facing developers, or potential initiators, of these alternative programs is how to obtain necessary expertise and funding without relinquishing control and grass roots input. Although some community groups interested in establishing parent-child centres have experienced success in this regard, funding remains a serious problem for some groups.

This participative character of these alternatives suggests a changing role for early childhood professionals. The fact that programs are initiated by parents and/or community members does not mean that the early childhood professional has no role to play. Indeed, the early childhood professional is a valuable participant; however, experience to date suggests that a redefinition of this role is needed in the context of alternative programs. This redefinition needs to include the recognition and acceptance of non-traditional groups as legitimate and active participants in a real partnership. Such partnerships involve not only joint advocacy but also a commitment to shared decision making and responsibility. The development of the skills and concomitant attitudes required for working with parent partners presents a challenge to both teacher education and the professional development of early childhood education groups and organizations.

These alternative programs also suggest a partnership role for the school in supporting community-based early childhood initiatives. This role is important given the school's long-term associa-

tion with children and families in a community. An example of this developing partnership can be inferred from the conclusions reported by the Canadian Education Association (1983) in its survey of day care services in Canadian schools. Because many parent-child centres and other child care programs are located in school buildings and often share school facilities and services, this report observed that this "cannot but help change citizens' views of the schools' role" (p. 36).

The alternative, innovative approaches to care and education described suggest a promising development in the field of early childhood education in Canada. Most promising, perhaps, is the evidence that community initiatives responding to local child and parent needs are feasible and successful.

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