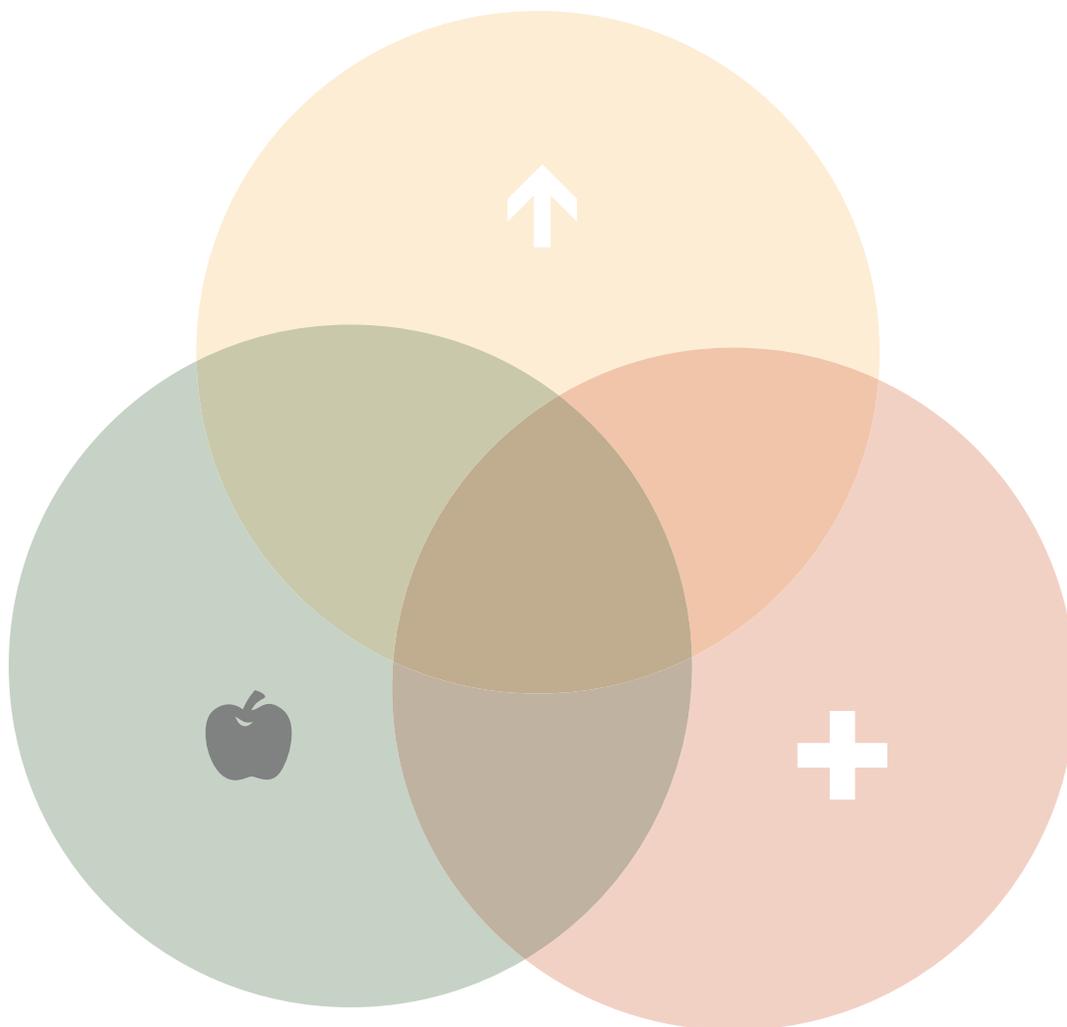


ISSUES OF COST & ACCESS

IN CANADA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION SYSTEM

LESSONS FOR THE CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM



BEYOND SILOS, TOWARDS STRATEGIES

2012 Roundtable Series

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Written and researched by:

Sabreena Delhon

Sana Affara

Les Jacobs

Raajkumar C. Kannan



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Canadian Forum on Civil Justice
3015 Osgoode Hall Law School
York University
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3

communications@fcj-fcj.org
www.fcj-fcj.org

INTRODUCTION

In recent years in Canada, there has been growing appreciation that early childhood education (ECE) is a basic foundation for building a successful education system, competitive global economy, and a well functioning democracy. A policy of publicly funding ECE programming is, in other words, seen as a smart investment in the future. This new appreciation of ECE is evident from the fact that ECE is now integrated into our school system and early childhood educators are recognized as trained professionals, not mere childcare workers. ECE policies in Ontario are now a model of evidence-based decision-making. Early learning initiatives such as full-day kindergartens and seamless days are based on new innovative research on child development that shows the long term benefits of skills such as early literacy and self-regulation for young children. ECE is also an effective compensatory vehicle for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

At the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, we are interested in increasing access to the civil justice system and exploring parallel responses to similar problems in other fields providing social services. Is public funding of a fair, effective and accessible civil justice system like ECE a smart investment in the future? Do proactive measures and early intervention provide for a comparative analysis between ECE and the civil justice system? What lessons from ECE experts can inform research and policy aimed at improving access to the civil justice system?

RE-THINKING COSTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

“Prevention over correction” is a key phrase driving investment in ECE. The earlier a problem is identified, the more likely an efficient and local response will prevent the cascading effects of disadvantage from unfolding into adulthood. This approach is supported by mounting evidence that links substantial long-term benefits with physical and emotional well-being in childhood.

Intervention research suggests that the rate of human learning and development is most rapid in the first five years of life. Longitudinal studies that tracked life outcomes for a group of children into adulthood concluded that early educational interventions produce not only significant individual educational benefits but also broader societal ones. Children from high quality pre-school programs do better in school from kindergarten through grade 12. They outperform non-pre-school children on achievement tests throughout grade school and into adulthood. Early intervention services increase the child’s developmental and educational gains, increasing his or her eligibility for future employment and self-sufficiency.

The reframing of financial and social costs has been an integral aspect of Early Childhood Education policies — particularly since early intervention programs are considered quite costly. However, as ECE advocates note, the large initial programming cost is offset by the enormous benefits accrued through improved academic performance in later years and improved productivity of the labour force — conclusions which substantially improve national wealth. Investments in ECE produce similar results to investments in higher education — better-educated adults have higher incomes and

the initial cost of educational programs is returned to communities many times over. The yields are substantial and diverse affecting expenditures on public assistance and arguably the criminal justice system.

PARALLELS: CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Parallels between the civil justice system and early childhood education can be readily drawn.

The expression “justice delayed is justice denied” which defines the lengthy and increasingly expensive experience of litigants caught in the civil justice system parallels the argument that a society that tries to save money by not investing in early childhood education not only fails to meet the educational needs of young children but also is setting itself up to incur far more costly responsibilities in the future. Other parallels include the recent steps being taken in the civil justice system to promote early intervention in cases in an effort to protect citizens from incurring related financial and psychological harm.

Early childhood education is built on the importance of working with children in a consistently engaged and caring manner. It is arguable that the civil justice system could benefit from a similar orientation based on a holistic, proactive and caring approach to working with users and — when appropriate — their families. This is especially pertinent given the personal nature of most civil justice cases.

ECE and the civil justice system also face some similar challenges. Social inequality is a crucial element that early childhood education and the civil justice system both struggle to address. Ability to pay plays a role in both fields. Wealthier citizens can afford and typically live in close proximity to quality ECE programs and have the means to hire distinguished legal representation. In contrast, lower income citizens have limited choices — fees to access ECE programs may not be affordable and legal aid or self-representation may be the only viable options for seeking civil justice.

Utilizing new technology is another challenge in both ECE and the civil justice system. Children today have been born into a digital age that teachers are working to incorporate in their practices through methods such as e-books and smart classrooms. But these new technologies may also be hindering self-regulation and early literacy skills. Similarly, the justice system has integrated technology into its processes — mediation using Skype, video conferencing in courts and countless websites that interactively provide citizens with information about their legal rights. While new technologies have the potential to increase access and arguably reduce costs in the civil justice system, they also are in tension with many of the traditional norms and practices of the civil justice system that are organized around a personal relationship between the client and the legal professional.

QUESTIONS

By sharing common issues and initiatives relating to access and cost in different fields of social services, knowledge silos can be broken down and strategies to address social inequality can be advanced. The following questions about issues of access and cost in early childhood education are intended to spark discussion and advance strategies that remove barriers to access within Canada's civil justice system.

Has the universality of early learning initiatives such as Full-Day Kindergarten been an effective way to reduce the impact of economic inequality on the affordability of quality early childhood education?

How do early learning initiatives in Ontario address the cascading effects of socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion on school success?

Should the civil justice system aspire to be a 'caring' one like ECE?

Do these questions offer insights for reform of the civil justice system?