

Exciting Times! Tremendous Opportunities! Coming Out of the Margins! by Elaine Ferguson

These are exciting times for the child care sector. The Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI, 2000), the Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC, 2003) and the QUAD guiding principles for a national child care system (QUAD, 2004) have brought child care into the spotlight. These initiatives have tremendous implications for children, families, the child care sector and our nation.

We are at a point in the evolution of Canadian child care where our work is being pulled out of the margins and being recognized as an important component in a healthy country. With the QUAD principles guiding the development and growth of a national child care system, there is an opportunity to build a system that incorporates and demonstrates the values that child care practitioners share. Values such as *Inclusion*; because we believe that child care has to be available to all children, all families and all communities in Canada. *Quality* and *Developmental*; because we believe that every child must have care that contributes to their present and future well being. And *Assessible*; because parents need to be supported in their child rearing role and not bear the full burden of cost for the delivery of a quality child care service.

Our conversations:

At this time (April 2005) the sector is discussing, debating and proposing the best path to take in growing a national child care system based on the QUAD principles of...

- *Quality* - child care is regulated to keep children safe and ensure they are cared for by professionally qualified child development staff;
- *Universally inclusive* - open to the whole range of children regardless of their family's income, children's ability, culture etc.;

- *Assessible* - the cost of regulated early learning and child care is affordable to parents; and
- *Developmental* - programs include both care and development (learning) components.

Colleagues in the provinces and territories are actively engaging their sector, policy influencers and policy makers in ensuring that the factors that are important to their provincial or territorial child care system are reflected in the system and the processes used to develop it.

The conversations are about the current condition of our sector; strengthening certain aspects, righting some, dismantling others, and building new structures to support our expanded vision. We need to have these conversations, we need to ask questions, and we need to listen to what everyone in our sector is saying. At this important stage in the development of our sector, it is vitally important that the solutions we propose are developed through full and complete consultation with all stakeholders. Inevitably, the conversations will touch on some of the more contentious positions that are part of our complex sector.

For example, the issues around non-profit/private incorporation is one of the difficult conversations we are having here in Nova Scotia where child care programs are delivered by both non-profit and private child care programs. The conversation often relates to the use of public funds. The individuals and groups to which owners and boards are accountable differ with cooperative, non-profit, and private incorporation centres. Child care programs incorporated as cooperatives are responsible to their members and all profits go to the members either in cash or services. The child care service incorporated as a non profit entity is responsible to the community to carry out its goals and objectives. All profits must be

reinvested into the community for the public good. A privately incorporated entity is responsible to its shareholders; the stakeholders that have invested in the child care service. Shareholders decide how profits will be used. Entities that are sole proprietorships, requiring only registration as a business and legislation related to business practices, are accountable to themselves.

When we discuss a publicly funded child care system, the use of profits is a key issue. Other key issues are the motives for establishing a child care service; who benefits; what accountability measures have to be in place; how funding is used etc. These issues are related to methods of incorporation. Defining an inclusive provincial child care system is a formidable task within this diverse context. It presents challenges and necessitates innovative approaches to developing a vision as one child care sector. We have an opportunity to demonstrate that it is possible to bring child care programs of all incorporation structures together under the banners of quality, universal inclusiveness, affordability and developmental orientation. A system that focuses on the folks who are delivering child care, and what they need to do their work to the best of their ability.

Expand, Enhance and Stabilize

Expansion, enhancement and stabilization of child care services are the tasks involved in implementing the QUAD principles. The system must be *expanded* in order to meet the universally inclusive and the accessible principles - the number of places for children, the kinds of programs, the groups served, the price to parents, the cost to provide programs, etc. The system must be *enhanced* to meet the quality and developmental principles - the programs, the training for practitioners, the facilities, funding resources to programs, etc. And for expansion and enhancement to happen, the system must be *stabilized* - addressing retention and recruitment challenges, shoring up a fragile infrastructure, investing in existing programs, etc.

One of the most effective and efficient ways to expand, enhance and stabilize the child care system is through the establishment of an infrastructure to support professional practice. Such an infrastructure will go a long way to ensure that the promise of QUAD is fulfilled on a day-to-day basis for Nova Scotia's children. This infrastructure would equip child care providers in two ways: to move beyond compliance with minimum licensing regulations, into voluntarily setting even higher standards; and to continually improve the quality, range and financial efficiency of available child care services by developing their own professional development streams and self-regulating infrastructure. In Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Child Care Association and the Certification Council of Early Childhood Educators (both affiliate members of the Canadian Child Care Federation), Child Care Connection Nova Scotia and their sister Francophone organizations, Centre provincial de ressources préscolaires (CPRP), and Société provinciale des intervenantes du préscolaire (SPIP) have developed a ten-year development plan to establish a professional infrastructure that supports quality child care. At this point, the sector is so marginalized and its wages are so low, it is unable to provide the capital investment necessary to establish and sustain this infrastructure. The development plan proposes to grow the infrastructure over the ten years, and become self-sustaining within that period. Growing a professional infrastructure will do much to address the tasks of expansion, enhancement and stabilization. *Expansion* is addressed by increasing the bank of qualified child care practitioners to care for the children in the new spaces. *Enhancement*, by establishing standards of quality above licensing requirements. And *stabilization*, in addressing the challenges of keeping child care staff in the sector.

In a recent keynote address, Nora Spinks, Canada's leading expert on work-life harmony told an audience of child care practitioners, "It's a great time to be in child care." She went on to discuss the many opportunities that Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers have created by setting forth QUAD's principles of Quality, Universally Inclusive, Accessibility, and Development, as the framework for Canada's new national child care system. For Nova Scotians, the articulation of child care as a national priority, and QUAD as the framework for how it will be addressed, also yields some valuable opportunities. Beyond just adapting our current system of early learning and child care so that it better meets the needs of today's working families, we have an unprecedented opportunity to re-invent it in a way that increases our province's potential for prosperity today and our quality of life in the future.

While we need to think "re-invent" rather than simply "adapt" or "evolve," it's important to remember we're not starting from zero. The federal money that will come through the QUAD program is an opportunity to strengthen the province's current child care delivery system to the extent that the sector is confident in the future and can deliver high quality child care. The experiential knowledge of the hundreds of dedicated professionals who educate and care for Nova Scotia's children each and every day is an asset in growing the system. This money can be the seed from which we grow a comprehensive, sustainable system of child care that optimizes the potential of the current generation of children and keeps evolving to meet the needs of the generations to come.

Elaine Ferguson is Executive Director of Child Care Connections. Her career in child care began in 1970 as a child care practitioner in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Web Resources:

Canadian Council on Social Development- Child Care for Change Conference
www.ccsd.ca/subsites/childcare/
Childcare Resource and Research Unit
www.childcarecanada.org
Early Childhood Development Agreement
http://socialunion.gc.ca/ecd_e.html
Kids Canada Policy Digest
www.cprn.com/en/kids.cfm
Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care
www.socialunion.gc.ca/ecd-framework_e.html
Nova Scotia Department of Community Services
www.gov.ns.ca/coms
Social Union Framework Agreement
http://socialunion.gc.ca/menu_e.html

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