



**JANE BEACH AND
CAROLYN FERNS**

From Child Care Market to Child Care System¹

At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done — then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.

~ Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*.²

The ChildCare2020 conference aimed to address key challenges faced by Canadian child care, to reflect on current research, and — most importantly — to set out a bold vision and a path away from today’s child care patchwork towards a comprehensive national system. The ChildCare2020 vision paper identifies Canada’s reliance on a child care market as “the key explanation for this persistent patchwork”:³

Federal and provincial/ territorial child care policy encourages this dependence on markets, flying in the face of clear evidence that public management of child care, including public/non-profit delivery, is a much more effective and fair way to deliver services.⁴

Our mini-plenary session began with the premise that a child care system — not a market that treats child care as a commodity — is

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

fundamental to building full access to the universal, quality child care services envisioned by ChildCare2020. We were asked to address the

A deeply entrenched neoliberal approach to social policy at the federal level and in many provinces has left child care twisting in the wind. We have seen the total absence of the federal government from child.

question: How do we move from child care as a market commodity to child care as a system that treats child care as a public good?

To answer this question, we delved into: why child care has been left to the market; how the market shapes the way child care is viewed, developed, operated and provided; and why a market model is a barrier to building quality child care services that are accessible to all Ca-

nadian children and families regardless of where they live or their economic circumstances. We also proposed and discussed how a system compares to what we have now. What constitutes a child care system? How do we escape market thinking to build the system we need?

Why has child care been left to the market? The virus of market thinking

In *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Michael Sandel⁵ contrasts having a market economy to being a market society. In a market economy decisions about the allocation of resources, production, consumption and price levels are made by the actions of individuals or organizations seeking their own advantage. Sandel suggests that we have drifted instead into a market society: a way of life in which market relations, market incentives and market values come to dominate all aspects of life. Almost everything becomes a commodity. It minimizes moral and legal responsibility to provide many services.

Child care is not immune to the virus of market thinking. Of course a deeply entrenched neoliberal approach to social policy at the federal level and in many provinces has left child care twisting in the

wind. We have seen the total absence of the federal government from child care policy-making, funding cuts or limited expansion of child care funding at the provincial level, and the privatization of some of the few publicly delivered child care services that we have (those provided by municipalities in Ontario).

But the infection of market thinking has spread further than this. Market thinking has become so ingrained that even those of us who argue for greater funding of child care often become caught up in the market's principles, ideals and arguments, ultimately working against our own interests. The dominance of economic arguments to "invest" in child care — especially human capital development arguments — and the misuse of neuroscience to back up these arguments not only leave us open to critique and dismissal, but also feed into the very market discourse that is a barrier to the change that we seek.

In an editorial in the European *Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, ChildCare2020 speaker Michel Vandebroek warned against the persistent use of the "economic brain argument"⁶:

Of course it is tempting to use the economic brain argument, when you work in a field that for so many years has been disregarded by policy as a 'pre-pedagogic age', as the Belgian authorities claimed in the 1970s. Yet, we need to be aware that each time we use the economic argument to advocate for investments in early childhood education, we implicitly or explicitly also argue that the economic argument is the one that matters most. And consequently, by doing so, we reaffirm that the meaning of early childhood education is not to be found in early childhood, but in the integration in the future labour force of a meritocratic society. The danger is then that the inherently social nature of ECEC, as well as the care in 'care and education' are pushed to the background.⁷

Sandel challenges each of us to "to rethink the role and reach of markets in our social practices, human relationships, and everyday lives".⁸ Child care advocates must question and resist what Peter Moss terms "the stories of quality, high returns and markets" that seem almost natural to us. We must reflect on our principles, values and ethics, and create our arguments accordingly.⁹

More than big-box child care: Ten ways Canadian ECEC is shaped by the market

The market, more than any other topic, allows us to dig deep down to the root of what's wrong with child care in Canada. To better understand the way that the market society shapes our child care services we considered some key questions about the current state of child care. How do the services get there? What is the purpose of the program? Who pays and how? Who are the staff and how are they treated? Who is eligible? What is the coverage? What does quality look like? This led us to consider the ways that the market influences each of these facets of early childhood education and care.

In explaining how the market model of child care has been adopted with little debate in neoliberal countries, Helen Penn comments: "in Canada there has been a debate about the role of for-profit child care versus non-profit childcare, but essentially within a market context."¹⁰ Here in Canada, there is a strong tradition in child care advocacy of opposing for-profit and corporate child care. From the Mini Skools strike in 1983 (with the great campaign slogan "Mini Skools pays mini wages!") and the rejection of the Mulroney child care plan in 1987/88, to the fightback against Australian corporate child care giant ABC Learning's encroachment into Canada under the guise of 123 Busy Beavers, it has long been understood by many in the child care community that "big box" child care will never provide the child care system Canada needs.

More recent in Canada is the realization that the child care market involves more than just the auspice of the child care operator. In fact, the child care market shapes every aspect of child care services, including:

1. Service development and management. With a few exceptions, where programs are located, who they are intended for, when services start up and when they close down are all primarily determined by the market – by profit or financial viability, rather than by families' and communities' needs.

2. Consumer model financing. Child care funding is primarily demand-side in Canada. The federal Universal Child Care Benefit with its "your kids, your way" tag line is a classic example of a hands-off

approach to child care funding, lacking as it does even the stipulation that the funds be used for child care! The use in most provinces of parent fee subsidies is also a consumer financing method.

3. Limited public planning. Leaving child care to the market means that planning is weak, incomplete and short-term, with no overarching policy framework, few stated principles, goals, targets or timetables, and no sustained funding. We see a heavy reliance on private initiatives by charities, parent groups or business.

4. Regulations. In child care that is left to the market, governments rely on regulations to ensure health and safety standards in licensed programs, but these are often minimal and sometimes arbitrary, and may have little to do with the quality of programs. Take for example an outdoor play space requirement of 7m² per child — about the size of half a parking space. This requirement could be met by a shadeless, concrete yard surrounded by wire fencing, or by a rich and open play space incorporating natural elements. Both would meet the regulation, but are worlds apart in terms of play environment.

5. Market-driven programming. A market approach to programming and pedagogy tends to prioritize individual achievement, school readiness and academic outcomes above other goals. It prioritizes education over care and champions the schoolification of child care services. Curriculum becomes part of a centre's marketing strategy.

6. Minimal staffing. Staffing is the biggest cost in a child care budget. In child care left to the market, parent fees and staff wages are in constant tension — a zero-sum game. Without sufficient public funding going into a child care system, increasing staff wages comes at the expense of raising parent fees — something both for-profit operators and many non-profit parent boards may find unpalatable. Even non-profit operators who understand the importance of raising staff wages to program quality often struggle to meet this goal while maintaining financial viability. We are thus offered a false choice between quality and cost¹¹, when in fact both are critically important.

7. Limited integration of care and education. In a child care market, system change is difficult. Even with child care's move into

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

the Education ministries in many provinces, we continue to see a split system of 'care' and 'education'.

8. Relying on privatized services/ arrangements. A heavy reliance on private (both non-profit and for-profit) licensed services and unregulated arrangements goes hand in hand with a child care market approach because initiating and managing services is a private — not public — responsibility in a market. Parents are left on their own to piece together arrangements with little support.

9. Inequitable access. One of the results of items 1-8 is that access to child care remains limited. In fact poor and inequitable access is a hallmark of marketized child care. We may see many child care services opening in a neighbourhood where they would be profitable, but no spaces at all in another neighbourhood despite a great need.

10. Quality takes a backseat to profit/budgets. Research has borne out child care advocates' claims that for-profit child care is less likely to provide high quality care than are public or non-profit auspices.¹² But understanding the market's influence on quality goes beyond this to consider the way that the market limits quality and confines our thinking about the possibilities of quality. In a child care market we may see some excellent examples of individual programs, but individual solutions and competition dominate at the expense of improving programs overall.

No quality without equality

The market limits the possibilities of quality in another important way. The concept of quality itself becomes a marketing tool. Peter Moss describes 'quality' as "the most over-used and under-conceptualized of words in early childhood education".¹³ A word that we all use but upon which we rarely reflect. We must question what quality in ECEC means to us. Is it just the "promise of achieving conformity to desired norms" that Moss critiques¹⁴? Or can we conceive of a quality *system* that encompasses values such as equality and democracy?

There are alternatives! What builds a system?

We need to consider “How is a system most likely to occur?” and all the evidence — from international policy comparisons — suggests that a stable child care system will not sprout from the ground if left to the market. It needs political will, a commitment to public planning, and growing the system in public and non-profit settings to make it work.

In contrast to the market model of child care with its obsession with choice and competition, we can conceive of child care services as a “public good”, a service wherein consumption by one individual does not actually or potentially reduce the amount available to be consumed by another.¹⁵ And a service in the public interest—for the well-being of all of us.

Moss challenges us to escape the all-encompassing narrative of markets by asking political questions and thinking about our principles and values. Moss’ questions include: What is the purpose of ECEC? What are its values, ethics? What is our vision of the child, of the educator, of education and of care? What do we want for our children?¹⁶

At ChildCare2020 the vision paper began this crucial work, setting out principles of universality, comprehensiveness and quality. Reconceptualizing quality, the vision paper’s definition includes human rights considerations such as full inclusion of children with disabilities and respect for diversity, and integration of care and education. The vision paper continues to outline system components including: a national policy framework, a long-term sustained funding plan, and shared work on system development.¹⁷

With a foundation of principles and system components upon which to build, the question remains: *how* do we achieve this vision of moving from market to system?

In *The End of Laissez-Faire*, John Maynard Keynes wrote in 1926: “the important thing for Government is not to do things which individuals are doing already, and do them a little bit better or a little worse; but to do those things which at present are not done at all.¹⁸ ” We don’t need a government — federal or provincial — to shore up or tinker with the child care market. We must demand the end of laissez-faire child care policy. We must expect and work towards nothing less than a *transformative change* in Canadian ECEC.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

The ChildCare2020 vision paper calls on each of us to consider how we can achieve our child care vision and what role each of us can play to make it a reality. In closing his final book *Ill Fares the Land*, historian Tony Judt challenges us: “As citizens of a free society, we have a duty to look critically at our world. But if we think we know what is wrong, we must act upon that knowledge.”¹⁹ We know what is wrong with the child care market, and to a large extent we know what should replace it. The real question is: what are we going to do about it?

The ChildCare2020 conference provided more than a forum for academics and activists to discuss the child care issues of the day. It was a coming together of a powerful social movement for national child care in Canada. It is a movement whose ups and downs and close-but-no-cigar moments are well documented. It is a movement in the midst of generational change, welcoming and sharing leadership with young child care advocates eager to take up the torch. And for the first time in some years, it is a movement with a renewed sense of hope, potential, drive and focus. Each participant pledged to carry the vision forward and to work to make it a reality, through spreading the word, through organizing and through advocacy.

From market to system. As the ChildCare2020 poster says: “We will win!”

JANE BEACH is an early childhood education and care policy researcher based in Victoria BC. She has participated in several large child care studies in Canada and internationally. She regularly collects child care data on a pan-Canadian level and is also involved in regional and local child care studies, program development and program reviews.

CAROLYN FERNS is Public Policy and Government Relations Coordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. She worked for over 10 years at the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. Carolyn has a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master’s degree in Early Childhood Studies from Ryerson University. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and a member of the grassroots collective Advocates for Progressive Childcare Policy.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Based on the presentations by Carolyn Ferns and Jane Beach at the ChildCare2020 mini-plenary 7: "How do we move from child care as a market commodity to a child care system that treats child care as a public good?"
- 2 Burnett, F.H. (1911). *The secret garden*, p. 353. New York: F.A. Stokes.
- 3 ChildCare2020 (2014). *Child care in Canada by 2020: A vision and a way forward*. Available online at: http://childcare2020.ca/sites/default/files/VisionChildCare2020Nov3ENG_.pdf
- 4 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 5 Sandel, M. (2012) *What money can't buy: The moral limits of markets*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- 6 Vandebroek, M. (2014). The brainification of early childhood education and other challenges to academic rigour. *European early childhood education research journal*, 22 (1): 1-3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 8 Sandel, *Ibid.*, 14.
- 9 Moss, P. (2014). *Transformative change and real utopias in early childhood education. A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality*. London: Routledge.
- 10 Penn, H. (2012). "Childcare markets: Do they work?", p.19-42. In E. Lloyd & H. Penn. *Childcare markets: Can they deliver and equitable service?* London: Policy Press.
- 11 McDonald, M. (February 25, 2014). The false choice of quality vs. cost in early childhood education. *The Conversation*. Available online at: <http://theconversation.com/the-false-choice-of-quality-vs-cost-in-early-childhood-education-23303>
- 12 Childcare Resource and Research Unit. (2010). What research says about quality in for-profit, non-profit and public child care. CRRU BRIEFing Note. Available online at: <http://www.childcarecanada.org/publications/briefing-notes/11/11/what-research-says-about-quality-profit-non-profit-and-public-chil>.
- 13 Moss, *Ibid.* 22
- 14 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 15 Gravelle, H & Rees, R. (2004). *Microeconomics*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- 16 Moss, *Ibid.*
- 17 ChildCare2020, *Ibid.*
- 18 Keynes, J.M. (1926). *The end of laissez-faire and the economic consequences of the peace*. Available online at: <http://www.panarchy.org/keynes/laissezfaire.1926.html>
- Judt, T. (2010). *Ill fares the land*, p.237. New York: Penguin.