SHAPING MINDS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE: TWO CENTURIES OF PRESCHOOL IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) encompasses a range of programs and services for young children. This brief account of its 200-year history in Canada focuses on the motivations to provide services for children prior to compulsory school-starting age with attention to institutional models rather than family-based training and socialization. In the nineteenth century ECE promoters were mainly members of the social and political elite who spoke or wrote about the benefits of institutional ECE, or led, organized, or raised funds for actual services. Promoters changed over time to include missionaries, teachers, psychologists, social workers, parents, and politicians. While the earliest promoters were mainly interested in children's moral and intellectual development, the young age of scholars meant that education often needed to be combined with at least some elements of care. For this reason, the history's broader reach includes child care in a review of the main systems of early childhood education over the past 200 years: infant schools, kindergartens, and nursery schools.

SMALL BEGINNINGS

A small set of core ideas has directed developments in ECE over the past two centuries. The ideas have endured across time, and to the extent they have been exported or borrowed, they have reflected transnational ideas and movements. One is that even very young children are capable of learning; a second is that that early experience has a significant influence on later development. ECE promoters advocated "bending the twig early" and in a particular direction. While it seems likely that many parents also believed this, nineteenth century ECE promoters did not consider poor parents to be the best "first teachers." This was a motivation for ECE promoters in Montreal to form the Montreal Infant School Society, an organization that aimed to provide schooling for poor children.[1] As explained in the society's first report in 1830, "That the human mind is capable of receiving instruction, and of forming associations of ideas, at a very early period of its existence, must be evident to all who have paid attention to the first development of the mental powers."[2] The report went on to describe the corollary idea:

> *Since then, the human mind so early becomes the active recipient of impressions, it becomes an important matter to provide early means of preventing vice from*

> *introducing itself, and whilst the mind is yet in the beginning of its intellectual career, to lay the foundation of those principles, upon which the superstructure of truth, rectitude and piety may be raised in all their intrinsic worth and beauty.*[3]

The school was located on St. Dominique Street in a house shared with the School of Industry. For a time it offered residential care for a small number of destitute children, thus blurring its role as an educational service. ECE promoters in the 1820s were motivated to provide practical relief to children—food, clothing, and shelter—together with a desire to prevent future problems through the instruction of children.

The only preschool model in Europe and North America in the 1820s was the infant school, which was inspired by a system for educating young children devised by Robert Owen for the children of his factory workers in Scotland in 1816. Owen's infant school combined a child care service with an early learning program for children from about 18 months to five years of age. Owen set out general principles for teaching very young children in groups: the importance of play and kindly treatment grounded in an idea of development and learning that stressed the malleability of children and the key role the senses played in acquiring knowledge about the world. Learning was planned to be informal via play and thus pleasurable for children and embedded in social relationships.[4] The English educator and ECE promoter Samuel Wilderspin built on these ideas in the 1820s, promulgating through his many books a system of instruction which alternated simultaneous instruction in the gallery and small group lessons led by slightly older scholars, with regulated play out-of-doors.[5]

Infant schools were expressly planned as a means of crime prevention. In the words of Wilderspin, "Should any person still ask what can be the utility of taking children out of the streets so very young, I would answer, that it is likely to prove one of the greatest preventatives of crime that has been thought of for the last century."[6] Claims like this proved irresistible to ECE promoters in the colonies. Wilderspin's books found their way to Canada, along with some teachers trained in his system who were recruited by infant school societies in colonial cities including in Halifax, Quebec City, and Toronto in addition to Montreal.

The infant system was believed to be effective for teaching children from all backgrounds. Indeed, members of the social elite were keen to have infant schools for their own children, as in Montreal where the schools for the poor "raised a strong desire to furnish the children of persons in the upper ranks the advantages of which paupers were in the possession."[7] And the system was also considered to be effective for teaching English-language learners. There were short-lived experiments with infant schools for Aboriginal children at Methodist missions in the Bay of Quinte area in Upper Canada at Grape Island, Rice Lake, and Credit River, where the aim was literacy education as a means of evangelism. African American free woman Betsey Stockton, who had taught in an infant school for African American Children in Philadelphia, established the infant system in the Methodist schools in 1829.[8] Journalist and politician William Lyon Mackenzie visited the school at Credit River in 1830. The teacher was away on the day of the visit and the school was closed. However, Mackenzie's observations of a standard infant school set-up are worth including in full.

> *The school-room is a large and commodious apartment, with tiers of raised benches in the rear; on one division of which sit the girls, and the boys on the other. There are also desks and slates for ciphering, and copy-books and copperplate lines for those who write. The Bibles and Testaments are chiefly those of the London Society for promoting Christian Knowledge;* [...] *Among the school-furniture, are a handsome map of the world; the Arithmeticon; attractive alphabets on pasteboard; regular figures illustrative of geometry, some of them cut out of wood, and some of them made of pasteboard; the picture of Elijah fed by ravens; figures of birds, fishes, and quadrupeds, on pasteboard, coloured, accompanied by the history of each animal; the figure of a clock, in pasteboard, by which to explain the principles of the time-piece.*

Mackenzie ended his description by noting: "the walls of the school are adorned with good moral maxims; and I perceived that one of the rules was rather novel, though doubtless in place here.—it was, 'No blankets to be worn in school.' "[9] This rule was of course specific to the situation of Aboriginal children in the missionary infant school and the aim for their assimilation. The more common texts displayed on walls as recommended in a contemporary instructor's manual were excerpts from scripture such as "Fear God" and "Thou shalt not steal."[10]

The most basic form of early schooling was simply removing children from negative influence, a version of Rousseau's idea of negative education aimed at "shielding the heart from vice, and the mind from error."[11] As British social reformer and M.P. Henry Brougham explained in 1819 at the time of the start-up of infant schools, for poor children it was "nearly sufficient to set them good examples, and keep idleness and vice out of sight."[12] It is clear, however, that as nineteenth century systems of childhood education developed, curriculum became increasingly elaborate and tied to specialized teaching apparatus as in the infant school and in Froebel's kindergarten and the nursery school, which are described in the next section.

COMPETING APPROACHES

Friedrich Froebel opened his first kindergarten school in Bad Blankenburg, Germany in 1839. In Froebel's system of ECE, children's self-activity and use of materials under the direction of specially trained teachers facilitated their natural development. This contrasted with the methods and philosophy of the infant system with its focus on learning through emulation and observation. The infant system had passed from fashion by the time kindergartens were introduced into the United States in the 1850s by German immigrants as private educational programs for their own children or children of the elite.[13] Kindergartens were few in number until ECE promoters recognized their value for assimilating the large numbers of young immigrant children arriving in American, and later, Canadian cities in the 1880s and 1890s. In Canada, the kindergarten system's development was centred in Toronto owing to the efforts of chief inspector of schools James Hughes. Hughes recruited a teacher to come to Toronto, the American Ada Marean, who had trained with German kindergartener Maria Kraus in New York City. Marean operated a private kindergarten in Toronto starting in 1877[14] and taught in the first public school kindergarten in Toronto in 1883. Kindergarten proved popular with parents and the number of kindergarten classes in public schools grew rapidly, reaching 51 by 1900.[15] ECE promoters in Toronto argued that kindergarten would rescue children from the dangers of the street, echoing the rationale for infant schools from 50 years earlier: chief inspector Hughes's wrote in his 1885 report that the kindergarten's greatest good was for "the little ones whose mothers are occupied away from home in earning money, and who necessarily have to neglect their children."[16]

Kindergarten classes in public schools were opened in the same period in cities and towns throughout Ontario and in a limited way in other provinces. Kindergartens were also established in boomtowns in western Canada in the early years of the twentieth century: in 1900, the same year it was incorporated as a town, Yorkton opened a kindergarten in its newly built school; there was a similar pattern in Wetaskiwin, which had a new school in 1905, was incorporated as a city in 1906, and opened a kindergarten class in 1907.

The kindergarten system, like that of infant school, was believed to be effective for teaching all children. In jurisdictions where there were no public kindergartens, private fee-charging programs were occasionally established for children from wealthy families, and in a few cities charity programs were available for the poor. An example of the latter was in Winnipeg where the organizers of the Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association formed a program to bend children's faculties "in the right direction" and in pleasant manner, that is to say, through play-based activities.

> *The work of this Association is based upon the principles laid down by the founder of the system, Fredrick Froebel. Wherever such free kindergartens exist, little children are kept off the streets, and in the pleasantest manner possible their faculties are bent in the right direction; the first principles of correct living, such as good manners, habits of cleanliness, and industry, are unconsciously learned.*[17]

A handful of kindergarten classes for young Aboriginal children were also briefly introduced in schools on-reserve and in Indian Industrial Schools in Manitoba and the Northwest Territories in the 1890s, where the focus in the kindergarten class was on manual education, English language learning, and school readiness with the overall aim to re-socialize the children according to Euro-Canadian values.[18]

Expansion of kindergarten in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century stalled between the wars. Few major cities outside Ontario had kindergartens in public schools in the 1950s, and Canada-wide only 2.4% of preschool-aged children attended a public school kindergarten.[19] Developments in the curriculum and

pedagogy of kindergartens also stalled: as described by historian Barbara Beatty, its introduction into public schools meant that kindergartens became "more like the school systems into which they had been incorporated."[20]

New ideas in ECE evolved more easily outside the public school context: alternative approaches included Maria Montessori's system, the British nursery school, and the American university-based nursery education methods which had as their Canadian exemplar the work of William Blatz and his colleagues Dorothy Millichamp and Margaret Fletcher at the St. George's School for Child Study at the University of Toronto.[21] Beginning in the 1930s, St. George's graduates established nursery schools in church basements, community centres, and private homes in communities across Canada. Educational programs were offered in some child care centres with the introduction of a nursery school class for children aged two to 4. The influence of nursery education on child care increased in World War II when the Federal Government established wartime nurseries for the children of mothers engaged in official war work, and training of the staff was directed by Dorothy Millichamp from the Institute of Child Study.[22] However, while innovation was easier outside the public school, preschool education also engaged with prolonged and not always productive experiments with ideas such as the approaches of Montessori and Blatz due to the "insulation and isolation of preschools from the norms of elementary and secondary education."[23]

ECE was revitalized in the 1960s when preschool was again touted as a strategy for reducing poverty. Project Head Start was created in the United States in 1965 for young children considered to be "culturally disadvantaged" because they were poor and African American. Canadian initiatives were started on the model of Head Start: half-day programs focusing on school readiness, increasing children's IQ, and imparting middle class values. Preparatory preschool programs for Aboriginal children included a small number of "reserve nursery schools" as recommended in the Hawthorne report for the Indian Affairs Branch in 1967.[24] The longer-term influence of the 1960s preschool movement can be seen in the start of the community-based and federally funded Aboriginal Head Start program in 1995 for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children living in urban and northern communities, which was extended to Inuit children and children on-reserve in 1999.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The infant school approach to ECE has largely been forgotten, nursery education methods have been integrated into child care programs, and kindergarten is part of the public school system in all provinces and territories. The core ideas identified at the start of this essay—young children's ability to learn and the lasting impact of early learning—continue to direct developments in ECE in the twenty-first century. There is currently general agreement that early learning programs are not only good for all children, but also important for families, communities, and the larger society. Moreover, there is intense political attention worldwide on the potential for early education as an early years investment, based on notions of social melioration that is not unlike the ideas of earlier times.[25] In the United States, President Obama's recent Preschool for All initiative highlighted savings from preschool including "improved educational outcomes, increased labour productivity, and a reduction in crime."[26] Canadian physician and researcher Fraser Mustard took a somewhat different tack, warning in his 2006 report for the Washington-based Brookings Institution that failing to invest will have consequences for social cohesion. Mustard wrote, "Unless we find strategies to improve early childhood development in all societies, many societies risk slipping into chaos."[27] Yet Canada's own investment in ECE has been weak despite efforts in some provinces to make school-based ECE more widely effective through full-day kindergarten.[28] Canada fares poorly by international standards, tied for last place with Ireland on UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre benchmarks for ECEC provision in affluent countries in 2008.[29] A greater investment in early learning would show a strong commitment to children's and society's well-being.

NOTES

1 Bruce Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling in Quebec: Conquest to Liberal Governmentality – a Historical Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

2 Montreal Infant School Society, *First Report of the Montreal Infant School Society for 1830* (Montreal: Workman and Bowman, 1831), 3.

3 *Ibid*.: 3.

4 Helen May, Baljit Kaur, and Larry Prochner, *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth Century Missionary Infant schools in Three British Colonies* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, forthcoming.)

5 Wilderspin's guide was in its fourth edition at the time the Montreal school was started in 1829. Samuel Wilderspin, *Infant Education; or, Practical Remarks on the Importance of Educating the Infant Poor*, 4th ed. (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1829).

6 Samuel Wilderspin, *The Importance of Educating the Infant Poor* (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1824), 15.

7 *Canadian Courant*, 5 October 1833, quoted in Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling Quebec*, 181.

8 May, Kaur, and Prochner, *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods*.

9 William Lyon MacKenzie, *Sketches of Canada and the United States* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), 132-3.

10 William Wilson, *The System of Infants' Schools*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for George Wilson, 1826), 121.

11 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau's Émile or Treatise on Education*, abridged, translated and annotated William H. Payne (New York: D. Appleton, 1918), 59.

12 Henry Brougham, "Establishment at Hofwyl," *Edinburgh Review* 32 (1819), 506.

13 Caroline Winterer, "Avoiding a 'Hothouse System of Education': Nineteenth-Century Early Childhood Education from the Infant Schools to the Kindergartens," *History of Education Quarterly 32*, n° 3 (1992): 289-314.

14 "Kindergarten School," *The Globe* (Toronto), September 8, 1877, 7; "Miss Ada Mareau's Kindergarten," *The Globe* (Toronto), August 31, 1878, 02.

15 Kari Dehli, "They Rule by Sympathy: The Feminization of Pedagogy," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 19, n° 2 (1994): 203.

16 Toronto Board of Education, *Inspector's Report* 1885, 15.

17 Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association, 1897), 3. Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association Records, Social Planning Council Fond, Box P663, File 8, Archives of Manitoba.

18 Larry Prochner, *A History of Early Childhood Education in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009).

19 From a survey by Church using statistics from 1947 and 1948: E.J.M. Church, "An Evaluation of Preschool Institutions in Canada," *Canadian Education* 5, n° 3 (1950): 20.

20 Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 101.

21 The Institute of Child Study was known as St. George's Nursery School from its founding in 1925 until 1938 when it became the first institute at the University of Toronto.

22 Larry Prochner, "Share their care Mrs. Warworker": Wartime day nurseries in Ontario and Quebec, 1942-1945," *Canadian Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education* 5(1) (1996): 115-126.

23 Barbara Beatty, "Transitory Connections: The Reception and Rejection of Jean Piaget's Psychology in the Nursery School Movement in the 1920s and 1030s," *History of Education Quarterly* 49 (2009), 444.

24 Harry B. Hawthorn, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: Economic, Political, Education Needs and Policies*, part 2 (Ottawa: Indian Affairs Branch, 1967).

25 James J. Heckman, "Policies to Foster Human Capital," *Research in Economics* 54 n° 1 (2000): 3-56. Canadian ECE/ECD promoters have been at the forefront of this movement. See Margaret Norrie McCain and J. Fraser Mustard, *Early Years Study: Final Report* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, 1999); Margaret Norrie McCain and J. Fraser Mustard, *Early years Study 2: Putting Science into Action* (Toronto, ON: Council for Early Childhood Development, 2007); J. Fraser Mustard and Margaret Norrie McCain, *The Early Years Study Three Years Later: From Early Childhood Development to Human Development—Enabling Communities* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, 2002).

26 "Fact Sheet President Obama's Plan for Early Education for all American" (Washington, DC: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 13, 2013), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/13/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-plan-early-education-all-americans (accessed December 1, 2013).

27 J.F. Fraser Mustard, Early Child Development and Experience-based Brain Development: The Scientific Underpinnings of the Importance of Early Child Development in a Globalized World (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006).

28 In 2013 six provinces have full-day kindergarten. See Martha Friendly, Shani Halfon, Jane Beach, and Barry Forer, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2012* (Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit). http://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/CRRU_ECEC_2012.pdf.

29 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "The Child Care Transition, Innocenti Report Card 8, 2008" (Florence, Italy: Innocenti Research Centre, 2008).