Policy Review Assignment

Anne Fontaine (100057079)

Capilano University

Nov 15th, 2015

Instructor: Tia Smith
Article 18.2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2002) states:

For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. (pp.5)

I chose to review this childhood right because it directly connects to our class discussions and emphasizes the fundamental role and importance of family, school and the wider community in relationship with children’s rights. It speaks to the inter-related micro, exo and macro systems which inevitably influence children’s lives and well being. It also makes me question children’s rights in a world where they do not choose their family or the dominant political agendas; yet are hugely impacted by them. In what way can we protect children and promote equal opportunities for each child’s wholesome and healthy experiences and development in response to these diverse circumstances? “Early childhood is the period of most extensive (and intensive) parental [child-rearing] responsibilities related to all aspects of children’s well-being covered by the Convention: their survival, health, physical safety and emotional security, standards of living and care, opportunities for play and learning, and freedom of expression” (Committee of the Rights of the Child, 2005, pp.10). How do parents effectively navigate these complex times, and who is responsible to ensure they have or receive the means to fulfill their responsibilities? According to the Convention it is the State’s duty, the National Government, to assist families and ensure development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

An existing federal policy that supports Article 18.2 is Canada’s Universal Child Care Benefit. It aims to financially assist parents in their child-rearing responsibilities by providing choice in their child care arrangements. The conservative government created this benefit in place of a universal child care program in 2006. (Friendly, 2013) The benefit was $100 per month per child under the age of 6 but has increased to $160 per month as of January 2015 and
now includes $60 per month for children ages 6-17. The benefit is paid directly to the primary caregiver regardless of their child care situation or annual income, and the family can spend the money at their discretion. The Universal Child Care Benefit is not to be confused with the Canada Child Tax Benefit. The CCTB is financial support provided to families to help with the cost of raising a family, where as the UCCB is “designed to help Canadian families, as they try to balance work and family life, by supporting their child care choices through direct financial support”. (Canada Revenue Agency, 2015)

Most families will welcome the UCCB as “free money” to use against their cost of living and possible child care fees. For some families, this money may indirectly benefit children by assisting parent’s ability to provide for their children such as buying more nutritional food (often more expensive) or perhaps attending a social activity, but $160 per month will not be the difference between being able to access affordable child care spaces or the ability to enter the work force. With this policy, affluent families receive the same amount per child as families living in poverty. Does this enhance equal opportunities for children, especially for children living in vulnerable conditions? Though socioeconomics play a significant role in children’s lives, “most vulnerable children are not poor. Early vulnerability reflects widespread challenges of balancing caring and earning for many families at all income levels” (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2010, pp.1). The UCCB can mildly assist parents in the financial aspect of their child-rearing responsibilities through a very limited supply of money, but does not really address the deeper aspects of the actual performance of these duties or the need to develop institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. Bezanson’s study (as cited in Friendly, 2013) regarding parental views of the UCCB policy states “no one in the study suggested that the funds were sufficient to change their labour market attachment or to make their child care costs significantly more manageable”. This is further highlighted by Prince and Teightsoonian’s analysis (as cited in Friendly, 2013) noting, “it re-frames “universality” and redirects public resources to private sectors... the money was a “nice gesture” but that it had no actual impact on child care choices”. (pp.2)
According to the Convention Article 18.2 is a national responsibility, but in Canada “Education and child care fall primarily under provincial jurisdiction, and the federal role is limited largely to the transfer of funds to provincial and territorial governments for early childhood programs and services... Canada, however, lags behind many of its counterparts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with regard to early childhood development programs, both in terms of the proportion of GDP spent on public funding of early childhood education and care and in terms of enrolment of children in preschool education.” (Cool, 2007, pp.2) Without a national child care program in place, my community tends to consist of a wide range of dedicated and hard working groups and organizations trying their best to assist parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities. During the Democracy Cafe talks I saw postings for parenting workshops and social gatherings sponsored by private, public and non-profit organizations and partnerships such as WECAN, United Way, John Braithwaite Community Centre and Lynn Valley United Church. Though provincially funded programs such as StrongStart BC make great efforts to provide the necessary means for quality care and learning experiences for all children, they too are limited and must accommodate shared space, reduced funding, operate only a few hours a day during the school based year, and have difficulty reaching families most in need (HELP, 2007). “Full-school-day kindergarten and child care subsidy expenditures are incremental steps toward the new investment or re-allocation required for smart family policy. There are also concerns about reduced expenditures in other child and family support programs.” (HELP, 2010, pp.4) This mix match of underfunded organizations and volunteers also carry the weight of accumulating data and reports to analyze and challenge current family policies, as well as provide solutions to meet the needs of our unique community.

The Universal Child Care Benefit policy means allocated public funding that could be going toward organizing a comprehensive universal quality child care program which everyone can access and benefit from, are now going directly into individual families personal spending, some of whom don’t use child care. It does not reduce the cost of child care or increase the amount of available spaces, and limits children’s rights to care and education that are in their best interest. “In the past 15 years, profuse child development research has reinforced ideas
that were – until recently – new to many Canadians: that learning begins at birth, that young children learn through play, that development in the early years forms a platform for future success, and that early childhood education programs have an important role to play in how children develop. The strength of this research has convinced observers from diverse areas of interest such as economics, politics, and health to embrace the idea that high quality early learning and child care is the foundation for lifelong learning and fundamental for a prosperous 21st century society” (Friendly, 2006, pp. 6) The Early Learning Advisory Group reinforce these findings in the 2008 Early Learning Framework when they refer to early learning as “the emerging and expanding of young children’s physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and creative capacities”. They further explain children “develop both their capacity and dispositions to learn through supportive relationships with their families, with other children and adults in their communities, and with their environments. Early learning is the foundation for lifelong learning, and the basis for individual, social, economic, and environmental well-being.” (pp.2)

When we look at the Universal Child Care Benefit policy through Clyde Hertzman’s research into early childhood developmental influences, we can understand that a child’s experiences and environment matter and affect their development. Choosing UCCB over a universal child care program affects children directly when they are denied participation in important community early learning opportunities, or when they receive lower quality care due to affordability. Though a child’s global environment may support the family’s rights to appropriate assistance and services through the Convention, national and regional policies may not fulfill their role. This lack of cohesion between the child’s mesosystems may put additional stress on the family which in turn affects the child. The impact of this policy on work and family life balance may undermine a parent’s ability to effectively support their children’s needs. Children’s micro and exosystems may also feel the effects of this policy when parents need low cost care provided by grandparents or extended family. While some families may be able to arrange satisfactory solutions, other families may lack alternative child care or necessary resources such as financial planning or understanding of the system. For some this could be as fundamental as not registering their child for the UCCB, or not recognizing the benefit as
taxable income, leaving the possibility of money owing at tax return time. This additional income may also disqualify lower income families from accessing subsidy based services such as housing or other social programs. The dynamic exchange of children’s ecological systems should help us to realize how important it is to see social policy not as separate from children, but rather something they are an active participant within.

There is no end to the wealth of knowledge available in regards to healthy early development, so what is stopping our government from taking the next step and making positive change in fulfilling its responsibility to all citizens? Should children’s health and well-being be jeopardized and set aside to make room for political agendas, and what does it mean for citizens and children when our government implements policies such as Universal Child Care Benefits over beneficial, research based universal child care programs? Who does this policy really benefit? I wonder what would happen if children had a vote in their democracy. In 1990 Canada signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and became legally bound to it in 1991 (Canadian Children’s Rights Council, 2014). Article 4 of that convention specifies that “State Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention. With regards to economic, social and cultural rights, States Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international co-operation” (General Assembly of the United Nations, 2002, pp.2). Friendly (2006) explains further “the best interest of the child must be a priority. It should not depend on whether a particular party is in power; the economy has been well managed; interest rates rise or fall,... [and the international cooperation framework] would not apply to Canada as an affluent country with considerable wealth and a provider – not a recipient – of international aid.” (pp.19) Shouldn’t we therefore be a leader in regards to smart family policy? What would happen if we upheld children’s and family’s rights and offered them a universal child care program?
References


