The Internationalization of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Issues: Implications for Gender Equality

by

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Introduction

In this paper I investigate the extent to which the issue of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been “internationalized” to become the focus of attention of a number of international organizations (IOs) including the European Union (EU)\(^2\), the International Labour Organization (ILO),\(^3\) the Organization of American States (OAS),\(^4\) the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),\(^5\) United Nations (UN) agencies, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),\(^6\) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) -- through the instrument of the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- and the and the World Bank.\(^7\) Through an examination of a number of policy statements and other primary documents published by these organizations, the paper traces the attention these IOs have paid to the issue, as well as how these IOs frame\(^8\) the ECEC policy debate.

Building on Mahon’s examination of the frames found in OECD (Mahon, 2006; 2008) and World Bank (Mahon, 2009) policy documents, this paper finds that these IOs’ policy recommendations are increasingly dominated by human capital development frames, although there is evidence of three other competing frames: one that rests on more social pedagogic norms that promote a concern for the well being of the “whole child”; another that focuses on children’s rights to services and countries’ obligations to deliver services; and a fourth that focuses on parental employment concerns and the connection between ECEC policies and programs and gender equality.

The paper then examines the justice implications of the frames manifest at the international level and particularly the implications for gender equality of the human capital development frame.\(^9\) The norms underpinning this frame include a belief in the positive relationship between early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education (ECE)

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2 Relevant policy documents include, for example, European Commission Childcare Network (1990), European Commission Network on Childcare (1996) and others discussed below.

3 Relevant policy documents include, for example, ILO Office of the Director-General (2003), ILO Bureau for Gender Equality (2006).

4 In a plenary session on 16 November 2007, the Ministers of Education of the member states of the OAS adopted a hemispheric commitment to “increase quality early childhood comprehensive care and education policies and processes” (OAS, 2007).

5 Relevant policy documents include OECD (2001, 2006) and the numerous country notes and background reports.


7 Relevant policy documents include Young (2002; 2007).

8 I use the term policy “frame” rather than policy “discourse” to emphasize that paradigmatic views on ECEC policies and programs have not yet been formed. Instead, various actors are using a variety of persuasive devices to “fix meanings, organize experience, alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at state, and propose solutions to ongoing problems” (Payne, 2001, p. 39). I define discourses as “broad systems of communication that link concepts together in a web of relationships through an underlying logic” (Ferree and Merrill, 2000, p. 455). While Schmidt (2008) and others label these frames, they really are amalgamations of frames connected together with a coherent underlying logic. The framing process connotes the process by which “discourses, ideologies, and frames are all connected” (Ferree and Merrill, 2000, p. 456). For a broader discussion of these terms see White (2009).

9 A companion paper by Friendly and White (2009) on the quality implications of ECEC investment in liberal welfare states is in progress.
programs and children’s success later in life (e.g. Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998; Keating and Hertzman, 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2001; Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Lynch, 2004; Barnett and Masse, 2005; Heckman, 2006; Temple and Reynolds, 2007). The perspective rests heavily on cognitive-neuro-scientific claims about early learning, cost-effectiveness analyses of these programs, and social liberal ethical claims about ensuring individuals develop to their full potential (Mahon, 2009, p. 6).

Following Green’s (2007) critique of human capital development policy to achieving redistributive goals, this paper argues that a focus on human capital development concerns in designing ECEC policies and programs ironically may not lead to the kind of societal transformation for which both governments and feminist scholars hope. Human capital development framing influences the kinds of programs advocated (e.g. targeted versus universal), and requires governments to justify investment in rational cost-benefit terms rather than human rights or gender justice considerations. In the latter part of the paper, I offer an alternative framing that focuses in particular on justice considerations and workers’ rights issues.

IOs and ECEC Research and Policy Development

ECEC policy – which broadly spans education, social development, and labour market policy – is not an area that has traditionally been subject to a great deal of international attention. The international aspects of ECEC policy seem less obvious than, for example, peace and security (e.g. Ruggie, 1998), trade and economic and financial sector coordination and management (e.g. Pauly, 1997), climate change and pollution control (Bernstein, 2001; Haas, Keohane and Levy, 1993; Litfin, 1994; Young, 1997), immigration and migration (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004), and even science and scientific research coordination (Finnemore, 1993; 1996). Typically, IOs provide crucial fora for discussing military and economic security matters that cross borders. Outside of international economic and military coordination, states tend to cooperate on matters that cross borders (e.g. immigration, drug trafficking, pollution) and therefore require cross-national action to solve (e.g. Litfin, 1994, p. 1).

Why, then, should traditionally economic and financially-focused IOs such as the World Bank and the OECD focus on ECEC policies and programs, which raise no transborder issues? IO action also often occurs in policy areas such as the environment that have been characterized as “wicked” 10: there is a great deal of uncertainty because of the scale of problems to be solved and the impact on the future of current actions as well as the interdependencies of actors and actions (Litfin, 1994, p. 1). Such policy problems are often difficult to solve because of incomplete or contradictory information, and changing requirements that are difficult to recognize. Moreover, because of the complexity of the actors and issues involved, efforts to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). In such instances, scientific experts are often granted a privileged position in the policy process as policy advisors (Litfin, 1994): what Haas (1989, p. 384, n. 20) labels an epistemic community.11

Again, on a global scale of complexity and necessity of interdependent action, ECEC policy has not traditionally ranked as warranting international attention, although it has typically

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10 For further discussion of “wicked” problems see Rittel and Webber (1973); for a characterization of the environment as a “super wicked” problem see Levin et al. (2007).

11 An epistemic community is a “community of experts sharing a belief in a common set of cause-and-effect relationships as well as common values to which policies governing these relationships will be applied” (Haas, 1989, p. 384, n. 20).
engendered some transnational research networks and advocacy. Indeed, the IO that would appear to have the most potential interest in this issue because of the connection of ECEC to both effective parental employment and children’s lifelong learning – the ILO – has typically paid little attention to child care and early childhood education issues; its research program has historically included collection of data on maternity and parental leave but not a lot of work on ECEC.

In fact, a number of IOs came late to the issue of ECEC policy. Kamerman (2006, pp. 3-5) notes that the International Bureau of Education carried out a cross-national survey of ministers of education in 1939 that included a survey of pre-primary education. In the same year UNESCO endorsed “child care facilities for the growing numbers of working mothers” as well as voluntary preschool programs. But UNESCO did not study ECEC in depth again until 1961. In a 1961 memorandum, it again endorsed preschool programs in countries where primary school was already in place. It also endorsed the idea that care and education should be included in such programs, but establishing primary education in all countries was ranked as the main priority. Beginning in the 1960s, UNESCO began to report pre-primary enrollment data at five year intervals, but it did not conduct a comprehensive review of ECEC developments at that time, claiming there were too many unresolved issues around pre-primary programs (Kamerman, 2006, p. 6). As late as 1978, a World Bank working paper concluded that “on the basis of the available evidence, giving priority to support for preschool intervention could not be justified” (Kamerman, 2006, p. 8).

Kamerman (2006, p. 59) credits the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as the primary factor leading to “a re-assessment of the value of children.” And then in the 1990s “it was the Jomtien and Dakar conferences (discussed below) that both reflected and added to the growing public awareness of the value of preschool programs and provided a possible foundation for a new social movement” (Kamerman, 2006, p. 59).

The European Union was the first to develop an extensive research program around ECEC and other related programs as part of the EU’s second equal opportunities programme established to work towards women’s equal opportunities in the labour market (European Commission Childcare Network, 1990b, p. 1; Penn and Wilkinson, 1995, p. 151). The European Commission, responsible for overseeing the implementation of EU goals, created the Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities in 1986 to examine three areas: children’s services, parental leave, and men as carers (Peeters, 2007, p. 2). The network was comprised of an expert from each member state and a director, Professor Peter Moss of the University of London. It conducted its work over the following decade, producing a number of reports and was disbanded in 1996.

As part of its work, it hosted a seminar in 1990 that led to a discussion paper, Quality in Services for Young Children (European Commission Network, 1992). That paper prompted the Network to develop quality targets to help the EU achieve its goals as outlined in the 1992

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12 See, for example, the work of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development that emerged in the 1980s from a group of donor funding agencies including UNICEF, USAID, Ford Foundation, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, and the High/Scope Foundation (CGECCD, History of CG, http://www.ecdgroup.com/historycg.asp). See also the work of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (http://www.eccera.org).

13 For documentation of the global kindergarten movement historically see Wollons (2000). For documentation on ECEC developments in Europe see e.g. Scheiwe and Willekens (2009).

14 See for example the ILO’s social security database at http://www.ilo.org/dyn/sesame/ifpeses.home and previously The Cost of Social Security (e.g. ILO, 1997).
Council of Ministers’ Recommendation on Childcare (Council of the European Union, 1992b). This recommendation was a “political statement of shared principles and objectives covering such matters as leave policies, workplace support for working parents, increasing men’s participation in the upbringing of children, and services for young children” but only dealt with employed parents and those in training (Moss and Balaguer, 2004, p. 3). While the recommendation is clearly directed at improving women’s access to the labour market, it also states that child care services should combine “reliable care” with “a pedagogical approach” (see Cohen et al., 2004, p. 8). The network thus developed a report, *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children: Proposals for a Ten Year Action Programme* (European Commission Network, 1996) to help realize those objectives. The report contains 40 targets that included everything from staff/child ratios to financing, to administration and served as an important benchmarking exercise (Children in Europe, 2008, p. 5).

Still, until 2000, the EU’s main attention was directed at maternity and parental leave rights and benefits. The European Council issued a directive in October 1992, binding on member states, establishing minimum requirements regarding the health and safety of pregnant women, women who have recently given birth, and women who are breastfeeding, and mandated a maternity leave period of at least 14 weeks (Council of the European Union, 1992a). This contrasts with the Council’s softer recommendation to encourage member states to develop measures such as child care programs to enable women and men to reconcile family obligations and employment, education, and training (Council of the European Union 1992b). The European Council then issued a second directive in June 1996 established minimum requirements regarding parental leave and leave for family reasons, including a mandated three month parental leave for both male and female workers (parental leave in addition to the mandated maternity leave) (Council of the European Union, 1996).

Since 2000, Lewis and Campbell (2007, p. 7) argue that the EU’s focus “has switched from parental leave to promoting childcare provision,” although “childcare services have been the subject of a ‘target’…rather than a Directive as was the case for parental leave...” In the March 2002 meeting of the Council of Ministers in Barcelona, the Council established an EU-wide objective for member countries “to remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 12). Recommendation 2002 (8) suggests making pre-school children’s services available to all children at an affordable price. Still, the OECD (2006, p. 78) estimates that by 2006 only five countries – Belgium (Flanders region), Denmark, France, Norway, and Sweden – had achieved the target set by the Barcelona meeting, and Finland had if one excludes children under the age of one (as almost all parents take parental leave).15

By the late 1990s, other IOs began to pick up on the ECEC idea, the biggest and most visible within the advanced industrialized countries being the OECD (see e.g. OECD, 2001, 2006, as well as the OECD’s country notes and background reports on 20 countries). The OECD also came relatively late to ECEC issues, although Mahon (2009, p. 3) notes that the OECD’s working party on the role of women in the economy (ROWITE) issued a report on child care in

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15 The European Commission Childcare Network had recommended that European countries invest at least 1% of GDP in ECEC services (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996). The OECD (2006, p. 105) estimates that only five countries in Europe have achieved that level of investment: Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, and Sweden, and that the Flanders region of Belgium and Hungary are likely close to that benchmark.
1974. At the same time as ROWITE was conducting its study, the OECD’s Centre for Research and Education (CERI) was studying early childhood education (Mahon, 2009, p. 3). Mahon (2009, p. 3) notes that “Exchange between these two units helps to account for an important conceptual innovation – the concept of ECEC), although the OECD and other IOs did not continue in that research vein until human capital development concerns (re)appeared on the agenda in the 1990s. 

By the early 1990s, the OECD had become a champion of the importance of promoting employment and employability, especially for the less-skilled and the long-term unemployed (e.g. OECD, 1994a). It focused attention on two strategies: “employment-oriented social policies” including “active labour market policies” and a “life-long learning” strategy so as to ensure that children become productive economic actors as adults, and not marginalized (OECD, 1999, p. 3; see also OECD, 2001, p. 13). ECEC was seen as the key programme: that is, early childhood development was the basis upon which lifelong learning and development occurred and “When sustained by effective fiscal, social and employment measures in support of parents and communities, early childhood programming would help to provide a fair start in life for all children, and contribute to educational equity and social integration” (OECD, 2006, p. 3).

In 1992, the Ministerial Council of the OECD commissioned the Secretariat of the OECD to conduct a major study on the issue of high and persistent unemployment in the member countries. The Secretariat released its concluding report, *The OECD Jobs Study: Facts, Analysis, Strategies*, in 1994 (OECD, 1994b). That report recommended that “increasing the provision of early childhood education programmes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, is part of a long-term strategy improving labour force skills and competencies” (OECD, 1998; see also recommendation 8 of the 1994b report). One year after the release of that study, the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) released a report, *Our Children at Risk*, which recommended that countries adopt proactive measures for children in their early years so as to prevent school failure (OECD, CERI, 1995). Then, in 1996, the Ministerial meeting of the Educational Committee, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*, focused on early childhood education as well as a way to provide the foundations for lifelong learning. The Ministers’ communiqué articulated the goal of improving access and quality in early childhood education and care (OECD, 1996). The 1997 OECD Secretary-General’s note summarizing the policy conference *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda*, also highlighted the view that preventative policies, especially in the early years, should be given greater emphasis in countries’ social protection systems (OECD, 1997, p. 11).

The Education Committee of the OECD included early childhood education and care in its 1997-1998 program of work (OECD, 1998). It held an informal meeting of early childhood education and care policy experts in January, 1998. Subsequently, it announced its proposal for a thematic review of early learning and care practices of those member countries that had agreed to participate in the review (Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

The goal of the thematic review of ECEC policies and programs was to “provide cross-national information to improve policy-making and planning in early childhood education and care in all OECD countries” by reporting on countries’ programs and policies, including regulations and governance, staffing issues, programme content, and financing (Bennett, 2003, p. 22). It released its major report, *Starting Strong*, in 2001 on the basis of comparative analysis of those country studies (OECD, 2001). The Education Committee then conducted a second round of reviews (of Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Korea, and Mexico). It
released its second major report *Starting Strong II* in 2006 which reviews the progress the original countries made in achieving the goals set out in the first *Starting Strong* report and incorporated the new data from the second round of country reviews (OECD, 2006). The 2001 and 2006 OECD reports create certain benchmarks or standards as to what is good ECEC. Another very visible benchmarking exercise emerged in 2008 when UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre published a report card on ECEC services in 25 OECD countries (Adamson, 2008). That report developed 10 quite broad benchmarks for judging the minimum standards necessary to protect the rights of children in the early years. It found only one of the 25 countries – Sweden – met all 10 benchmarks.

These IOs have also provided the base for the creation of an internationalized ECEC epistemic community. One of the principal actors behind convincing the OECD to do the *Starting Strong* project was Canadian economist Abrar Hasan. He heads the Education and Training Division of the Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD whose focus is the promotion of lifelong learning. Two other principal actors behind the OECD project are the co-authors of the 2001 *Starting Strong*, report, Michelle Neuman, who at the time was an administrator in the OECD’s Education and Training Division and who is now the special advisor on early childhood care and education for UNESCO (Neuman, 2007) and was on the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report team (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 2006); and John Bennett, a consultant in the OECD’s Education and Training Division (OECD, 2001, p. 4), who also co-wrote *Starting Strong II* with Collette Taylor from the Queensland University of Technology, Australia (OECD, 2006, p. 5). Bennett had been the director of the Early Childhood and Family Unit at UNESCO from 1989-1997, and who provided the research, data and background papers for the Innocenti report card (Adamson, 2008, p. 36). Bennett is also a consultant for the Starting Strong Network that emerged after the Starting Strong project ended. This network is made up of country government representatives (currently organized and managed by the Flemish governmental agency, Kind en Gezin) with the mandate to: develop, share, and disseminate information “on experiences, research and good practice of countries in the field”; serve “as a clearing house of new policy research in the field and identify[...] new areas for fruitful policy research and analysis”; identify “data development needs and contribut[e] to the development of methodology for developing such data”; organize workshops on certain policy themes; and facilitate “contacts among researchers, policy makers and practitioners, and with international networks in related fields” (Starting Strong Network, 2008).

Why IOs Matter to ECEC Framing

It is important to scrutinize the way IOs are framing the ECEC policy debate first, because IOs are authoritative actors. International organizations, unlike traditional domestic-based social interest groups or social movements are perceived as carrying more policy weight (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004), either because a. as in the case of the UN and ILO, they can facilitate the negotiation of conventions that are then binding on country governments that ratify; or b. as in the case of the OECD, they provide advice to governments underpinned by their expertise and broader legitimacy on economic (among other) policies and perform peer review - examination and assessment of state policy by other states (Pagani, 2002); or c. in the case of the World Bank, they can build in policy requirements as part of loan conditions and have leverage owing to expertise and influence on bilateral lending policies. Country governments tend to pay attention to what IOs have to say about a particular policy, and certain IOs such as the IMF and World Bank have tended to be enormously influential regarding development policies because of
the expert knowledge they hold (e.g. Barnett and Finnemore, 2004, chapter 3). While much of the research on IO influence over domestic policy development has largely focused on developing countries (e.g. Weyland, 2006; Orenstein, 2008), increasingly, policy researchers are tracking IOs’ influence on advanced industrialized democracies through the use of “softer” forms of governance such as surveillance\textsuperscript{16} and peer review (see e.g. Orenstein, 2008 as well as Deacon, Hulse, and Stubbs, 1997; Armigeon and Beyeler, 2004; Mahon and McBride, 2008; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett, 2008). Indeed, Myers (2000, p. 41) argues that IOs’ influence in the area of ECEC policy specifically include “assistance in providing frameworks and action…, strengthening the knowledge base and disseminating information…, advocating (by organizing international fora, by negotiating conditions for financial support, and by marshalling the media), as well as by providing technical and financial support.”

The second reason to pay attention to what IOs say about a policy issue is the frames IOs use can be persuasive in setting new policy directions domestically. Bernstein and Cashore (2000, p. 68) argue that there are four pathways to non-domestic influence on domestic public policy. In the ECEC policy area, the first pathway of influence they identify – the use of the global market – is less relevant than the second – international rule-making which is relevant in the case of the EU – and even moreso the third – changes in international normative discourse – and the fourth – the infiltration by international actors of the domestic policy-making process. While other research investigates the fourth pathway (e.g. Mahon and McBride, 2008; White, 2009b), this paper concentrates on the third pathway. As Finnemore (1993, p. 594) argues, IOs can provide “an arena in which norms and convergent expectations about international behavior are developed.” IOs as authoritative actors therefore can play a crucial role in the process of domestic paradigm change (Hall, 1993) through norm creation. The power of IOs in the social policy area is really ideational (Gourevitch, 1978) and relies on persuasion rather than force. This can be useful when dealing with advanced industrialized countries where more intrusive mechanisms such as loan requirements are not an option.

Policies related to the family, the role of women, and the care and education of children tend to be highly controversial and ideologically loaded (White, 2009). Because of past normative disinclination in liberal and conservative welfare states to “defamilialize” social reproduction (Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Gornick and Meyers, 2004), it has proven difficult to persuade policy makers to act (and the public to accept) government funding of ECEC services; that is, to shift from seeing child care as a private good and early education as unnecessary, to seeing both as essential, integrated public services (Bennett, 2003). International organizations’ framing of these policies as necessary or best practice may thus overcome traditional antipathy to these programs.

For all of these reasons, what IOs have to say about ECEC policies and programs should be of crucial interest to International Relations and Comparative Public Policy scholars as the scope and substance of internationalization can be an important explanatory factor in promoting policy change domestically. The devil, however, is in the details of the ideas being promoted.

**ECEC Frames within IOs**

I have identified four sets of ECEC ideas IOs have been promoting:

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\textsuperscript{16} Surveillance involves the monitoring of compliance with goals or benchmarks which member states set for themselves through these international bodies (Marcussen, 2006, p. 198).
ECEC as Part of Human Capital Development

All of the IOs considered in this paper have endorsed to some extent the set of policy prescriptions that best reflect what Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003) call the “social investment” or what I’m labeling the human capital development paradigm (see also e.g. Jenson, 2006). For these IOs, education is increasingly recognized as an important foundation for a country’s economic success. Globalization prods governments to pay attention to education because, in order to be competitive in a globalized world of free-flowing capital, labour markets need to be flexible and able to adapt. A knowledgeable and adaptable workforce is necessary because “the only real asset that most advanced nations hold is the quality and skills of their people” (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p. 28). If schools fail to create that workforce, then a government needs to adopt strategies and policies to make sure its workforce adapts either through job retraining. But “Remedial policies once people have reached adulthood are unlikely to be effective unless these adults started out with sufficient cognitive and social skills” (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p. 30). Thus, countries are increasingly examining the factors that encourage or inhibit employment. Furthermore, labour market issues are increasingly preoccupying member governments and are seen as requiring coordinated action, both at the European Union (EU) level and under international and regional trade agreements (e.g. O’Brien et al., 2000; Linos, 2007).

Attention has only recently been paid to early childhood education, however. For example, in 1990, the countries participating in the UN’s World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, while declaring that “learning begins at birth” also stated that “early childhood care and initial education…can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, or institutional programmes, as appropriate,” and that the “main delivery system for the basic education of children outside the family is primary schooling” (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 1990, p. 4). In 2000, in contrast, the countries participating in the UNESCO World Education Forum in Dakar, Sudan, committed to “expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” as part of its six Education for All goals (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 2000, p. 8). That commitment to expanding and improving ECEC did not go as far as the explicit target of 2015 by which “all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality” (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 2000, p. 8, emphasis added).

UNESCO (2006, ch. 5) justifies the need for such programs based on arguments that the early years are important for children’s brain development, that early childhood programs can enhance development and provide an important way to equalize children’s primary education experiences and overcome economic disadvantage and exclusion, and that investments in early childhood produce economic gains for countries. The Organization of American States (OAS, 2007) justifies its hemispheric commitment to early childhood education because “childhood is a decisive phase in the human life cycle and a comprehensive approach to it will allow us to overcome the challenges of poverty, inequity and social exclusion.” The World Bank is the

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17 The World Bank (Young, 2002, p. xi; Young, 2007, p. vii) lists a number of multilateral agencies involved in its early childhood development symposiums in addition to those mentioned here, such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as development banks such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

18 This conference was co-sponsored by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank.
strongest proponent of the human capital development view of ECEC (see, e.g. World Bank, 2008c; Young, 2002; 2007) while at the same time endorsing a broad range of early child development (ECD) programs including child health, child nutrition, as well as early childhood education and care (Young, 2002, p. 1).²⁹

The basis of this human capital development perspective includes a belief in the positive relationship between ECD and ECE programs and children’s success, not just in the primary grades of school, but throughout their lives in the form of higher high school graduation rates, improved employment and earnings, better health outcomes, less welfare dependency and juvenile delinquency (e.g. Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998; Keating and Hertzman, 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2001; Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Lynch, 2004; Barnett and Masse, 2005; Heckman, 2006; Temple and Reynolds, 2007). As Esping-Andersen et al. (2002, p. 20) articulate the argument, “The quality of childhood matters ever more for subsequent life chances” because “It is in childhood that citizens acquire most of the capital that they, later, will activate in the pursuit of a good life.” Thus, “A social investment strategy directed at children must be a centerpiece of any policy for social inclusion” (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p. 30).

The social investment perspective rests heavily on scientific claims about the positive effects early learning and early childhood interventions have on children’s subsequent development. For example, the 2006 OECD Starting Strong II report (annex d) contains a summary of some of the international research that has accumulated that supports public investment in ECEC based in part on cognitive neuro-scientific claims about the benefits of early learning on young children, as well as the cost effectiveness of these programs (see also OECD 2002; OECD, CERI, 2007). In fact, the World Bank (e.g. Young, 2007, p. iii) states explicitly that “evidence- and population-based instruments and measures to monitor, evaluate, and compare ECD [early childhood development] interventions over time and across settings” are needed because “[t]he leveraging of enhanced policies and investments in early childhood development depends on being able to assess and document, consistently and rigorously, the need for ECD programs across communities and the outcomes for children and families participating in these programs” (see also and Myers and Hertenberg, 1987).

Those cost-benefits analyses also factor heavily into the persuasiveness of the policy recommendations (e.g. World Bank, 2008a), with the message being that if these programs did not deliver future positive economic returns, they would not be worth doing. In fact, half of the six judges on the Canadian-based Institute for Research on Public Policy’s (IRPP) Canadian Priorities Agenda recommended against the adoption of a national early childhood development program because there was not enough evidence “to justify adopting a national template at this time” (Tuohy, 2007, p. 527; see also Lipsey and Watson in the same volume).

Cost-benefit analyses are often at the root of whether programs should be delivered in a targeted or universal manner, and whether governments should commit resources broadly to early child development programs writ large such as child health and child nutrition, or specifically early childhood education and care. Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003, p. 87) suggest that human capital development is a government’s principal concern, then it will focus on targeted programs “to particular populations categories deemed to be at the margins, or at risk of exclusion” such as the National Child Benefit program in Canada, as well as Community Action Program for Children, Aboriginal Head Start, and so on, and Sure Start in the UK and Head Start

²⁹ The OECD’s position on human capital development and other perspectives is explored later in the paper.
in the USA. However, as Doherty (2007) and others (e.g. Evans, Hertzman, and Morgan, 2007) argue, it is often difficult for governments to clearly identify which populations are “at risk” and the populations that would benefit most from these programs can be much larger than and different from traditionally targeted populations such as low-income families.

All IOs but the World Bank have stated support for universally accessible ECE programs as a principal instrument in a human capital development strategy. While some, such as the EU (European Council, 2002) have established explicit targets by which they wish to see governments achieve comprehensive ECEC (discussed below), others such as the OAS’s (2007) hemispheric commitment to early childhood education merely asks governments to “Increase quality comprehensive early childhood education coverage, in accordance with each member state’s possibilities and with the long-term goal of universalizing its integral care for the very young.”

**ECEC as Part of a Social Pedagogical Approach to the Child**

Human capital development is not the only perspective underlying IOs’ research and policy recommendations. This in some ways complicates the message IOs send and may affect the extent to which country governments adopt IOs’ recommendations at all.

The early child development perspective promoted by the World Bank (Young, 2002, 2007) and researchers such as Keating and Hertzman (1999) can be interpreted to prescribe a targeted approach to ECEC services, or a universal approach with targeting for the most disadvantaged groups. But at root it emphasizes the promotion of children’s overall developmental needs: their health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; positive attitude towards learning; good communication skills; and cognition and general knowledge (e.g. NEGP, 1997). As Bennett (2003) argues, that ECD concern for the “whole child” and childhood as a *sui generis* period in life underlies the social pedagogical approach, as does the notion of the child as learner.20 The child as learner means not just in the purely cognitive way that many human capital arguments conceive of learning as “school readiness” and achieving a certain level of literacy and numeracy by a certain age. As Bennett (2003, p. 31) argues, in many countries currently “Although the gradual extension of each child’s competencies [is] a major pedagogical aim, emphasis [is] placed also on the well being of children, and on the importance of warm, affective relations.”

Of course, those concerned with human capital development would not disagree that social pedagogy is important. Bennett (2003, 2005) thus develops a more sophisticated means of differentiating between what he calls the traditional pre-primary approach to early learning from a social pedagogical approach (see also OECD, 2006, ch. 6). Bennett (2003, pp. 31-32) argues that the following markers distinguish a social pedagogical approach:

- Psychological and social development [is] the rule rather than formal instruction.
- Low child-staff ratios [are] practiced so as to ensure adequate interaction with each child. There [is] a trust in the child’s own ability to develop and learn, but this trust [is] underpinned by the careful provision of learning environments run by professional staff, specifically trained to provide care and education in a manner appropriate for young children. Much emphasis [is] placed on the outdoor learning environment and on the child’s freedom to explore and choose his or her own activities.

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20 It is relevant to note that John Bennett was co-author of the OECD’s major publications from its cross-national thematic review of ECEC policy (OECD, 2001, 2006).
In contrast, the traditional pre-primary approach tends to “move away from the child and her developmental desires and rhythms, towards an adult-defined agenda. Group sizes tend[...] to be large, and because of numbers the adult-child pedagogical relationship predominate[s]. Teachers – often trained primarily as primary teachers – encourage[...] conformity and good behaviour through positive reinforcement…” (Bennett, 2003, p. 32).

Bennett (2005, pp. 6-7) differentiates these approaches by looking at countries’ curriculum frameworks. He argues that a country’s underlying approach to ECEC cannot be discerned simply from a curriculum, that is, the plan of instructional activities to inculcate learning, but rather from the overall framework that looks at three broad sets of quality indicators: structures, orientation, and interaction. Structural factors include the amount of investment in the system, child/staff ratios, staff levels of certification and professional development, and the infrastructure for programs i.e. buildings, resources, and so on. Orientation factors include the kinds of legislation, regulation, national curriculum, staff standards and so on in place, as well as that staff’s understanding of the principles and purposes of ECEC. Integration factors include the quality of relationships in services and the interaction between staff and children.

The OAS’s (2007) statement on early childhood education emphasizes some of these broader social pedagogical criteria. Objective e. recommends the coordination of “educational sectors and institutions with other national, local, and subnational authorities responsible for providing protection, nutrition, health, culture, and social welfare-related components in such a way as to guarantee the provision of comprehensive early childhood care.” Objective f. speaks to strengthening the preparation and professional development of all educators, including “teachers, families, and communities.” Objective g. calls for the formulation of “policies and educational, inter-institutional, and inter-sectoral coordination strategies for the successful transition of children between the different stages in early childhood.” And Objective h. calls for mechanisms to evaluate the quality of ECEC programs. Similarly, in its review of ECEC policies around the world, the Education for All global monitoring report emphasizes issues of quality and effectiveness in ECEC programming (UNESCO, 2007, chs. 7, 8).

The World Bank, in contrast, is much less committal as to what the “right” ECEC program design is. On its ECD project website, it states explicitly that “because differences in culture and economic environments make it impossible to rely on just one approach in early child development, it is important to identify a range of effective models rather than emphasize a single program model. A community’s first priority might be to provide child care to enable mothers to work, suggesting the need to deliver direct services to children in formal or informal care settings. Another community might not share the need for day care but still needs to improve children’s development, suggesting the use of a parent or teacher education program” (World Bank, 2008b).

Moss (2006, p. 73) argues that much of continental Europe does not regard ECEC services in purely human capital development terms. Rather, conventional wisdom regarding the child in much of continental Europe is that ECEC services provide children with “qualitatively different experiences and relationships” than in the home and are therefore a “complement to, not a substitute for, the home.” Children “are active subjects and citizens with rights, able to participate with ease and enjoyment from an early age in both private and public spheres,” and child care workers are “reflective and researching practitioners, and as such many are graduates with similar status to school teachers” (Ibid). That is, there is less fear that participating in these
experiences will somehow damage the child; to the contrary, such experiences are necessary for the fully flourishing child.

Moss (2006, p. 73) labels this thinking regarding ECEC services as “pedagogical” but by this he does not mean “the science of education” as it is known in the English-speaking world; rather, it connotes “education in its broadest sense” that addresses the whole child (body, mind, emotions, identity, and so on) and as embodied in certain pedagogical approaches such as Reggio-Emilia. Furthermore, care “cannot be extracted and treated as a separate field of policy, provision or practice or as a commodity that can be packaged and sold on the market” (Moss, 2006, p. 74). Care and education are should thus be regarded as universal entitlements as is the case in many social democratic countries including the Nordic countries (Moss, 2006, p. 79).

Mahon (2006, 2008) argues that there is evidence of both social pedagogic and human capital development frames in OECD documents. Certainly a great deal of the research work conducted by the OECD has been influenced by scientific understanding of the importance of the early years. Not coincidentally, at about the same time as the Starting Strong project began, the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation began its Learning Sciences and Brain Research project in order to “discover what insights cognitive neuroscience might offer to education and educational policy and vice-versa” (OECD, 2002, p. 9). One of its research tasks was to investigate the importance of the early years of a child’s life to successful lifelong learning (OECD, 2002, p. 12). The OECD sponsored three academic conferences, the first on early learning in 2000 involving a number of academic experts. The second phase of the project (OECD, CERI, 2007) involved a number of country governments’ ministries of education as well as the US National Science Foundation. The corpus of research the 1998 OECD document cites gives an indication of the mainly US research that informed the first Starting Strong review. The second Starting Strong report (OECD, 2006, ch. 9 and annex d) also presents evidence supporting the importance of the early years to children’s success in life.

While the origins of the Starting Strong project were grounded in human capital development thinking, the principal actors involved in the project promoted those ideas in conjunction with broader social development goals, as evidenced in the documents they produced. The 2001 Starting Strong report (p.3) claims that the OECD study took “a broad and holistic approach to studying children’s early development and learning.” From its survey of the initial group of participating countries’ policies, it identified eight key elements of a “successful” ECEC policy: 1) “a systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation”; 2) “a strong and equal partnership with the education system”; 3) “a universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support”; 4) “substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure”; 5) “a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance”; 6) “appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision”; 7) “systematic attention to monitoring and collecting data collection”; and “a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation” (OECD, 2001, p. 11).

In addition to fulfilling an educational purpose, that is, to determine what countries do best, the OECD reports also offer policy recommendations. The 2006 Starting Strong report (p. 4) recommends that governments, in building their own ECEC systems: 1) “attend to the social context of early child development”; 2) “place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child’s agency and natural learning strategies”; 3) “to create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance”; 4) “develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services;
5) “base public funding estimates for ECEC on achieving quality pedagogical goals”; 6) “reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights”; 7) “encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services”; 8) “improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff”; 9) “provide freedom, funding and support to early childhood services”; 10) “aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy.” These recommendations fall more into the social pedagogical framework Bennett (2005) identifies, rather than just human capital development.

The inclusion of a broad range of policy experts was typical of the Starting Strong project and can account for the mixed frames within various reports and policy documents. For example, the list of participants at the experts meeting in January 1998 in Paris included a representative from the Toronto Board of Education in Canada, representatives from the US Department of Education and the French Ministry of National Education as well as the French national social services network the Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales (CNAF), academics such as Dr. Peter Moss from the Institute of Education, University of London and Sharon Lynn Kagan from Yale University’s Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy, and a UNESCO researcher (personal correspondence with OECD official, 11 April 2008).

**ECEC as Part of Children’s Rights**

The social pedagogical approach, with its emphasis on ECEC as a universal entitlement links with a more rights based framing. As Martin Woodhead (2007, p. 12) argues, Framing early childhood policy in terms of child rights departs radically from a conventional, instrumental approach. Children are no longer envisaged merely as the recipients of services, beneficiaries of protective measures, or subjects of social experiments. Nor should early childhood be seen as an investment opportunity, about exploiting human capital. Instead, each entitlement is valued as an end in itself.

Woodhead (2007, p. 12) notes that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child “has changed the policy landscape dramatically, with advocacy for early childhood increasingly based on recognition of young children’s universal rights. In doing so, it establishes a new kind of universal standard.”

The idea of ECEC as a human right tends to be promoted mainly by the United Nations. For example, the Dakar Framework for Action adopted by the participating countries of UNESCO’s World Education Forum justified its Education for All commitments on the basis of a number of human capital investment rationales (as discussed above), but also articulated a rights-based approach to education: that is, “all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term” and that education “is the key to sustainable development and peace and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century, which are affected by rapid globalization” (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 2000, p. 8). In addition, Article 5.3 of the Programme of Action that emerged out of the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 states that “Governments, in cooperation with employers, should provide and promote means to facilitate compatibility between labour force participation...
and parental responsibilities...Such means could include...day-care centers...kindergartens...paid parental leave.”

Currently, three international conventions recognize child care as a human right (Davis, 2005). Article 11 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 deals with employment rights for women. It commits state governments to eliminate discrimination against women in employment and to ensure equal employment opportunities with men. Article 11 (2) specifically commits country governments to provide maternity leave protection and paid maternity leave and Article 11 (2) (c) commits those governments “To encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities.”

Article 18 (2) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 commits country governments to “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.” Article 18 (3) in addition states that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.”

Finally, Davis (2005, p. 147) notes that the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which recognizes that “everyone has a right to work and to have an equal opportunity to be promoted in employment” has also been interpreted to include child care.

Outside the UN, some other IOs have picked up the discourse of rights. For example, while the Ministers of Education in the member countries of the OAS (2007) committed to developing comprehensive early childhood education programs on the basis of human capital investment concerns, they also state that “equitable and timely access to quality and integral education adapted to global and local contexts and global realities is a human right, a public good, and a political priority…” The European Commission is also currently engaged in a consultation exercise based on a 2006 document Towards and EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

Unlike the human capital development paradigm, rights arguments do not impose attendant duties and responsibilities on part of children to learn or be economically successful. Rather these rights declarations simply impose obligations on states to provide these services. But without appeal to cost-benefit rationales, and without acceptance from governments of the moral imperative to act, it has been difficult to persuade country governments to comply. The USA in fact has not ratified any of the three major UN conventions with the view that “it has little to learn from human rights practices of other nations” (Davis, 2005, p. 148). Australia, which has ratified CEDAW, has entered a reservation to the article that commits countries to implement paid maternity leave (Brennan, 2007, p. 41). Countries which have ratified are supposed to submit reports to the UN Committees monitoring compliance (Davis, 2005). Under Canadian law, though, these international treaties have no legal effect domestically until they have been adopted as part of Canadian law. Thus, there is no mechanism, other than shaming, to ensure compliance with these conventions.21

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21 Nevertheless in Canada, some academics (e.g. Howe and Covell, 2005), advocacy groups such as the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF) and Parliamentarians, most visibly Senator Landon Pearson, have worked to persuade Canadian governments to recognize these children’s rights in law. In the USA, in contrast, Davis (2005,
ECEC as Part of a Labour Market Participation Strategy

One could say that all of the IOs considered in this paper have endorsed to some extent the notion that “the relative lack of investment in childcare and parental leave policies tends to undermine the position of women in the labour market” as well as affect the overall economy by way of higher unemployment (with parents dropping out of the labour market) and a lower income tax base (Bennett, 2003, p. 33, 36). The sacrifices in labour market participation that primarily women make in order to care for children are extremely costly for those workers and their families: they result in considerably lower earnings accumulated over a lifetime, as well as lower pension earnings, health and other benefits coverage (e.g. Gornick and Meyers, 2003). They are also costly to governments increasingly faced with labour shortages. There are thus points of overlap with human capital development arguments. As Esping-Andersen et al. (2002, pp. 10-11) argue, “Gender equality policies should not be regarded as simply a concession to women’s claims. If society is not capable of harmonizing motherhood with employment, we shall forego the single most effective bulwark against child poverty – which is that mothers work. We shall, additionally, face very severe labour force shortages or, alternatively, a shortage of births. And, as women now tend to be more educated than men, we shall be wasting human capital.”

As mentioned above, the ILO’s principal focus has been on the promotion of paid maternity leave as an important component of workplace gender equality. The member countries of the ILO first adopted its first convention on maternity protection in 1919 (Convention No. 3). The convention endorsed a program of 12 weeks of maternity protection with benefits “sufficient for the full and healthy maintenance of herself and her child.” The convention covered all women working in industry and commerce. In 1952, the ILO member countries ratified a revised convention (No. 103) which extended the 12 week program to all women workers. The member countries also passed Recommendation 95 which endorsed that the leave period be extended to 14 weeks (six week prior to birth and eight weeks afterward) at 100 per cent of prior wages. The 2000 ILO convention (No. 183) endorsed the extended leave period of 14 weeks with benefit levels of not less than two-thirds of previous earnings. The 2000 ILO Recommendation (No. 191) endorsed a leave period of 18 weeks with 100 per cent wage replacement.

With regard to child care, in 1981, the participating countries in the ILO passed Convention 156 concerning workers with family responsibilities. Article 5 (b) of C156 declared that “All measures compatible with national conditions and possibilities shall further be taken…to develop or promote community services, public or private, such as child-care and family services and facilities.” Part 5 of the accompanying Recommendation 165, Workers with Family Responsibilities, details a number of recommendations regarding child care to “encourage and facility the establishment, particularly in local communities, of plans for the systematic development of child-care and family services and facilities…” (ILO Bureau for Gender Equality, 2006). Of the liberal welfare states, only Australia has since ratified the convention.

The OECD has also tackled ECEC as part of its research agenda on policies to promote the reconciliation of work and family life, mainly through its Babies and Bosses project (e.g. OECD, 2007; see also Mahon, 2006; 2009). In fact, Bennett (2003, p. 40) argues that “In most
countries, policy for under-threes still emphasizes expansion of services as a necessary support for maternal employment in a strong economy, rather than as a public service that can benefit both children and parents.” The UN (e.g. UNESCO, 2007), in contrast, tackles the issue as one of equal education for all, that is, girls and boys, women and men.

The EU has gone furthest in pushing for ECEC programs to promote the “reconciliation of work and family life” (e.g. European Commission, 2006), although, as Stratigaki (2004) argues, such a framing does not necessarily promote gender equality. Indeed, while labour market concerns drive EU policy making, another major driver is member governments’ fertility concerns, as exemplified in the 2009 conference hosted by the Czech EDU Presidency under the European Council, the theme of which was “Parental Childcare and the Employment Policy: Collision or Complementarity?” (the online programme for which can be found at: http://www.eu2009.cz/scripts/file.php?id=14519&down=yes). Indeed, currently the OECD and EU are engaged in a joint project that operates under the auspices of the EU Government Expert Group on Demographic Issues to assess EU member countries’ family policies (Lohmann et al., 2009, p. 4).

Conclusions: Limitations of Current ECEC Framing and an Alternative Approach

The evidence presented above demonstrates that ECEC policy has truly been internationalized. IOs policy agendas focus on a number of ECEC policy issues that reflect a changed thinking about childhood, the nature of learning, and the kinds of programs necessary for successful childhood and adult worker lives. The authoritativeness of the organizations addressing these issues, the potential for policy diffusion through international and domestic policy networks, along with the tools at IOs’ disposal, including suasion, peer review, and surveillance may work to overcome domestic governments’ traditional resistance to state-funded ECEC programs.

The evidence presented above demonstrates, however, that the meaning and value of “early learning” and “care” programs remains contested. No one normative vision of ECEC policies and programs has become dominant at the international level, leaving room for alternative frames to emerge. The important question to ask, therefore, is what is the ideal framing that will promote a gender equality agenda?

A number of concerns have been raised about the current frames articulated at the international level. First, John Bennett (2007, p. 9) and others (e.g. Penn, 2009) raise concerns about the narrowness of economic efficiency arguments embedded in human capital development policy frames. As Bennett (2007, pp. 9-10) points out, “the rationale for much of this renewed investment is not primarily one of concern for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but rather a model of economic efficiency” that is largely about deficiencies in educational achievement alone, rather than the “underlying causes of low achievement” such as family poverty.

Focus on human capital development arguments can be tremendously beneficial in creating the normative and policy rationales for government investment, although a lot of the discussion centres around the efficiencies of targeted versus universal programs, rather than justice and citizenship rationales for ensuring access by all children to these programs. Furthermore, despite both the human capital development and social pedagogic literatures’ emphasis on the importance of investing in quality programs, many countries’ programs tend to be underfinanced (Bennett, 2007, p. 10) and monies are often taken away from traditional income support programs that are crucial to increasing family income (Green, 2007, p. 398). An
excessive emphasis on evidence-based policy making can be used as a cudgel to thwart broader public investment beyond narrowly targeted groups and neglect the wider rationales for these programs such as promotion of “social cohesion, respectful integration of diverse populations, and family support” (Bennett, 2007, p. 10). These sorts of frames also undermine children’s rights claims to access high quality programs regardless of the economic returns garnered.

Human capital development frames can also potentially contribute to a gender equality agenda – for example, the World Bank’s concern about lifelong learning leads it to endorse equal access by girls and boys to education – but more often can ignore women’s needs while focusing on a narrow set of labour market or early childhood development concerns. A focus on efficient delivery of programs, for example, may lead governments to endorse part-day early learning programs. But those kinds of programs do not address needs of working parents who require care for their children full-day and full-year. As Sonya Michel points out, an exclusive focus on children’s interests in the construction of these programs can lead to neglect of mothers’ rights (Michel, 1999; see also Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004; Prentice, 2009). Furthermore, a model that rests on lifelong learning and labour market participation can lead to the devaluation of caregiving that goes on within the household that is unremunerated.

Human capital development arguments also completely neglect issues of workers’ rights and particularly the low wages and poor working conditions associated with care work in general. Economic efficiency arguments, for example, could counsel governments to invest in lower-cost non-unionized labour, not acknowledging that the vast majority of those workers are women - often immigrants or migrant workers – who often perform caregiving in informal household environments that make them vulnerable to exploitation. A policy emphasis on high quality, universally accessible programs that take into account both children’s equality and gender equality considerations would also counsel the adoption of more institutionalized and better-remunerated ECEC service delivery models. Such institutionalized models better ensure non-exploitative relations between consumers and providers of ECEC services as well as fairer wages for a largely female workforce.

References


