

The destruction of early education

Kate Tennier, National Post

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"The city planners didn't realize that the old buildings were not the problem; the jumble of humble streets and houses was the neighbourhood's strong suit. The faceless apartment towers that were raised in their place actually made social conditions worse."

Tom Cruickshank on Toronto's mid-century "urban renewal" project, Regent Park

Fifty years after "slum clearance" obliterated entire neighbourhoods across North America due to the cult of Progress practised by self-reverential bureaucrats, it is now understood that the cure was worse than the disease.

It is with shockingly similar shortsightedness that the current crop of educational central-planners can not see that Ontario's rich tapestry of diverse early learning opportunities and the "humble activities and practices" of those now caring for and educating Ontario's young are our strong suit, and that it is the one-size-fits-all, full-day schooling of three-to five-year-olds that will drastically curtail their education.

Other than for the two-and-a-half hours of existing kindergarten, over 85% of Ontario children under the age of six spend their time in home-based, open-ended learning environments, with almost 50% receiving their care and education from parents. The remaining 15% are in daycares or nursery schools with much healthier ratios than are found in kindergarten (where classes can be filled to the brim with as many as 23 three-, four- and five-year-olds under the supervision of one adult.)

One hundred percent of Ontario's youngsters are in parent-chosen care and very few are in school all day -- good news for kids.

Now, in the same way pharmaceutical companies don't promote low-cost natural remedies they can't profit from, the Edutocracy belligerently refuses to study solutions they can't control. But, evidence tells us that less school combined with more parental agency is the best thing for young children.

In his book, *Standardized Childhood*, Bruce Fuller, a University of California sociologist and self-described California liberal, offers a critical analysis of the early-

schooling mania sweeping his country. He reports that moving children from 15 hours of pre-school to 30 has provided little in the way of cognitive growth and that "the slowdown in social-emotional development, which has even been detected for children attending preschool for 15 hours, doubled in magnitude for children spending 30 hours or more per week in a preschool center."

In Oklahoma, where universal early-schooling has existed for a decade, on the National Assessment of Education Progress, students have "slipped below the national average on math and reading scores for both the fourth and eighth grades since [Oklahoma] began expanding government preschool."

(It is also worth noting that one of the rationales for Oklahoma's move to put more little kids in school parallels one reason for Ontario's scheme:

On two occasions, I've heard paid supporters of the status quo public school system say that something had to be done to fill the emptying classrooms caused by declining enrolment.)

There is documentation that literacy rates were higher in the United States before the advent of compulsory schooling in the mid 1800s -- a time when parents were still responsible for their child's education. And research on the positives of keeping kids out of the system today is strong and growing. (It is also peer-reviewed in contrast to all-day kindergarten "studies" which rarely grace the pages of peer-reviewed journals.)

In one study, the Fraser Institute found that "students taught at home by mothers who never finished high school scored a full 55 percentage points higher than public school students from families with comparable education levels." And before anyone can say "right wing," this analysis is consistent with what the revered left-libertarian Ivan Illich had to say about the disproportionately negative impact of schooling on the poor. It also parallels findings in the Peabody Journal of Education report, *Homeschooling: the Ameliorator of Negative Influences on Schooling*. It is parental agency that is the key to home schooling's success and something all parents could exercise if given a choice over their child's education, home-based or not.

And, along with parental agency, it is how a child spends their most valuable commodity -- time -- that is central to understanding why our currently thriving, self-organized network of early education works and why all-day schooling won't.

This new half day purportedly consists of an hour long nap-time and an hour of dramatic play. Aside from the obvious question as to why we need "professional educators" (at up to \$80,000 a pop) to administer this mind-bending curriculum, this program is neither fish nor fowl: There is no adult providing consistent one-on-one

guidance, but nor is the child engaged in the kind of self-initiating, wide-ranging play and discovery that is crucial to their development, the kind that most young children in Canada are still lucky enough to enjoy.

Just yesterday I met up with a neighbourhood home-care mother who had buckets and shovels for use at the local park where sand and water can be mixed (in contrast to the classrooms in which I taught where never the twain were allowed to meet due to health and safety concerns).

I would often see another neighbour's daughter, when little, participating in errands in our commercial district with her daycare centre. And I know of home-care providers who have their older children, after settling in with milk and cookies, read to the younger ones, creating the "one room schoolhouse effect" that is so beneficial to both teacher and taught. Visits to the grocery store (considered a key place to pick up literacy skills), the bank, the doctor's office, libraries, parks, drop-in centres and play groups all are rich opportunities that parents, home child-care providers and small daycares (which are not tied down by the regulatory burdens of schooling) can freely offer their children.

Furthermore, they are initiatives that all adults can engage in masterfully if encouraged to do so. While there is the constant spewing out of the "parents-are-a-child's-first educator" bromide, parents have not been enfranchised enough to make this a reality.

We need to remedy this oversight by having our government put their money where their mouth is. I propose a new program called "Kindergarten Credit" where the funds allotted for this second half-day of kindergarten be given directly to parents so that instead of watching the "seamless day" the educational equivalent of the "faceless apartment towers of urban renewal" descend upon us, we can keep alive this powerful diversity of educational options that is working so well for our kids.

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