



MONTREAL RESEARCH LABORATORY ON CANADIAN PHILANTHROPY

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Case Study concerning the Early Child Development Funders Working Group

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Methodology

Sources

- Four semi-directed hour-long interviews with Working Group member foundations
- 209 journal articles referring to Early Years Study 1, 2 and 3
- 220 academic publications referring to Early Years Study 2 and 3
- 22 sets of minutes of Working Group meetings
- Public documents concerning Working Group members (annual reports, websites, financial information from the Canada Revenue Agency, etc.)
- Provincial and federal government publications

Analysis Method

- Content analysis of interviews and minutes of meetings based on the variables of the D'Amour et al. inter-organizational collaboration model in order to qualify the nature of collaborations involving Working Group member foundations
- Quantitative analysis of the media coverage of Early Years Study 1, 2 and 3 and content analysis of 64 journal articles referring to Early Years Study 3 in order to assess the impact on public debates of the publication of the latter study
- Quantitative analysis of the academic influence of Early Years Study 2 and 3 and content analysis of references to Early Years Study 3 in 60 academic publications in order to assess the impact on academic debates.

Summary of the Case Study

The Working Group was created in 2009 as an initiative to coordinate the efforts of eight Canadian foundations with a view to renewing the early childhood public policies of federal, provincial and territorial governments through their participation in public debates, efforts begun by some foundations since the publication of Early Years Study 3 in 1999. Having come together at a symposium of the Council for Early Child Development at the initiative of the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Lawson Foundation, the Group constitutes a learning network pursuing the common goal of promoting access to quality education, financed by public funds, for all children from the age of two.

The Group's activities mainly consist of meetings during which information, experiences and ideas are exchanged concerning a strategy conducive to effecting changes in public policy, in particular the dissemination of knowledge and the coordination of collaborative projects. Being not particularly formalized, the functioning of the Group is based on shared leadership, mutual knowledge and members' trust; decisions are made by consensus, enabling the expression of disagreements and preserving member autonomy. Supported by a secretariat tasked with coordinating logistical, financial and communications aspects, the Working Group benefits from the expertise in early childhood public policy provided by the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development.

The drafting and dissemination of Early Years Study 3 and the creation of an Index of Early Childhood Education Assessing the Performance of Provincial and Territorial Governments in Early Childhood, which will be republished every three years by the Atkinson Centre, represents

the Working Group's main achievement. The publication of Early Years Study 3 contributed to a wider dissemination of public debates around early childhood in the different Canadian provinces, especially introducing information concerning the evaluation of government performance, while its impact on academic debates seems to be more limited.

Research Issues

Difficulties encountered

- The difficulties of mobilizing foundations to participate in the research project
- Variable relationship of trust among foundation members surveyed
- Variable degree of transparency among the different foundations, making use of information sensitive in the context of the research.

Avenues of research

- Interpersonal networks appear to play a role in the establishment of collaborative projects involving Working Group member foundations more than inter-organizational relations. In order to broaden understanding of the dynamics around forming and implementing collaborations, it would be helpful to analyze the professional trajectories of the member foundations involved as well as their collaboration in terms of interpersonal collaborative networks.
- Given the current state of research, the impact of the Working Group on public policies remains difficult to determine, influence instead being exercised by member foundations on the basis of their respective intervention territories. It would be helpful to analyze the impact of advocacy work by the foundations – or even by the interpersonal networks forged within the framework of collaborations among the foundations – on public policies through the lobbying of government officials. What research strategy should be adopted in order to further this avenue of research?

Practical issues and courses of action

- What is the capacity of the foundations to carry out joint, coordinated, structured and sustained actions in order to influence public policies while seeking to preserve their own autonomy? Is it possible to strengthen collaborations by establishing partnerships which formally bind all the foundations to carry out a common project?
- How can a “common voice” be developed among members of a network such as the Working Group when participating foundations carry out actions in different political and institutional contexts and consequently face distinct issues? In the current context of changes in the relationships between the state and civil society, both provincially and federally, how can a strategy to influence public policy take into account these various political and institutional configurations and their transformations?
- What means, strategies and partners should foundations favour in order to ensure the effectiveness of influence on public policies? Beyond the dissemination of knowledge to inform public authorities on early childhood issues, up to what point could Working Group member foundations carry out advocacy work in order to influence public policies?

Diagram of collaboration networks

