Elements of a high quality early learning and child care system

A system made up of a series of linked elements is the best way to ensure that high quality early learning and child care (ELCC) programs are the norm rather than the exception, according to research and comparative analysis. These elements — *Ideas, Governance, Infrastructure, Planning and policy development, Financing, Human resources, Physical environment, Data, research and evaluation* — that make up the system need to be taken into account together. Considered individually, their potential to have a positive impact will be weaker.

Research shows that the common obstacles to high quality in ELCC programs are often structural weaknesses — lack of adequate financing, unfavourable staff:child ratios, poorly qualified and inadequately paid staff, and poorly developed and implemented educational theory. These characteristics are determined by public policy.

Thus, a high quality ELCC *system* is the basis for high quality in ELCC programs and strong public policy is the foundation for a high quality ELCC system. The elements of a high quality ELCC system operate as a whole: there is no "magic bullet." For the system to function well to support high quality at the program level, attention must be paid to all elements.

1 Ideas

A conceptual framework that includes...

- A clear statement of the values that underpin the system
- System-level goals for children and families
- Educational philosophy related to the values and goals
- Curriculum defined as a short general statement

A high quality ELCC system should begin by articulating the ideas that will define it. The ideas will be contained in a conceptual framework that begins with a statement of the values held by the society and what it wants for its children. The values statement is based on implicit societal values and beliefs about the nature of the child and childhood. It is coloured by the history, circumstances and context - economic, social and cultural - in which the society exists.

Different societies often have different perceptions about children, childhood and the purposes of early learning and child care. While these sometimes produce significant variations in ideas about quality in ELCC programs, countries with different histories and circumstances share many common ideas too. As Debbie Cryer (USA) points out: "the core quality elements… appear to cross international borders."

Long-term system-level goals break down the values statement into more detailed pieces. These should include goals for children - what kinds of attitudes, skills and propensities we want to encourage. These could, for example, include developing respect for diversity; ability to work cooperatively with others; love of learning; self confidence and creative expression. They should also include goals for families, for example, confident parenting and participation in the workforce; and goals for the community and society, for example, a well-educated citizenry, gender equality and social inclusion.

The conceptual framework should also include an educational philosophy and framework to support practice at the individual program level. "Educational" is used here to mean what is sometimes called "pedagogy," which can be translated as "education-in-its-broadest-sense." Moss and others have described this as development of the child through active involvement with the environment and

with others by exploring, questioning, experimenting and debating, rather than as a prescriptive plan for instructional activities.

How programs should be organized to support the goals and philosophy is sometimes called a curriculum. This should be a short statement that outlines the processes by which the stated outcomes for children are to be achieved, for example, through experiential learning, play-based programming, involvement with adults and other children.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an explicit educational philosophy and general curriculum serves several purposes: (1) promotion of an even level of quality; (2) provision of guidance and support for staff in their daily practice; and (3) facilitation of communication between parents and staff. The educational philosophy and curriculum should be flexible so that it can be adapted at the level of the individual program by well-trained and respected early childhood educators while still being consistent with the broad vision.

Program standards such as child-staff ratios, staff training qualifications and parent participation support the philosophy and curriculum.

Finally, the importance of an ongoing participatory process that includes discussion with a range of stakeholders about the conceptual framework and the other elements of the quality system should not be overlooked. According to Irene Balaguer: "Defining quality is a process, important in its own right; and the process should be democratic and continuous. "

2 Governance

Roles and responsibilities that include...

- A clear definition of roles and responsibilities of governments at different levels, parents and the community set out in legislation and policy
- Public management at system level
- Not-for-profit operation
- Program delivery managed at local level
- Appropriate involvement of community, researchers, parents and children

In ELCC, governance involves role definition, management, participation and ownership. A necessary condition for an effective approach to ELCC quality is definition of the respective roles and responsibilities of governments (and levels of

government), of the community, of parents and of other players such as employers, that is "who does what?" Setting roles and responsibilities out in legislation and policy is critical for clarity, effectiveness and sustainability.

Responsibilities in ELCC range from service planning and development to maintaining and managing programs, financing, assessing and monitoring quality. If roles and responsibilities are ambiguous or unassigned, key functions such as program development and planning may be overlooked or – like financing – may fall heavily on the shoulders of parents.

Roles and responsibilities for ELCC involve both public and private players. In Canada, public players include national, provincial/territorial and local governments such as municipalities and school boards; private players with a role in ELCC include parents, community or voluntary groups, employers and the business sector.

The idea that early learning and child care should be a publicly managed service has been suggested by the OECD in its Canada review. This implies that a public authority should manage functions such as planning, training and professional development, finances and infrastructure although services may not necessarily be publicly delivered.

While in Canada all levels of government— federal, provincial/territorial and local - have key roles to play in the definition, formation and management of ELCC programs, the idea that much of program delivery should be determined and managed locally is congruent with the concept of subsidiarity, that is, the human rights principle that tasks are best handled by the lowest level competent authority. One of the benefits of local management of program delivery is that it makes it possible to involve community members, parents and children in the issues of program delivery that are most important for them — staffing, facility design and programming — to ensure responsive programming. Above the level of the individual program, community members and parents can be involved with setting priorities, planning and quality assurance for a locally managed system. However, as Mahon points out, while communities are the place where the policies of senior levels of government are put in place, local management is sustainable only if it is supported by the policy and financing to which those senior levels have greater access.

A final governance issue is concerned with the operation or ownership of ELCC services. The idea that ELCC programs are best provided as community-

based non-profit or public operations, not businesses, is well grounded in Canadian and international research on quality. This literature shows that there are numerous problems with for-profit child care, as well as significant advantages that accrue from higher quality community-based non-profit and publicly-operated child care. Prentice points out that "when child care is conceived of as a public good, rather than a market commodity, its close relationship to social capital and social inclusion become obvious". The OECD made the point in their Canada review that "a protective mechanism used in other countries is to provide public funding only to public and non-profit services…"

3 Infrastructure

Coordinated program administration that includes…

- Policy, planning and program delivery organized in one lead department
- Legislation as a basis for the system
- Regulation defining minimum standards
- Monitoring to ensure standards are met
- Mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement
- Ongoing consultation and assessment of ELCC programs
- Public education about early learning and child care

The conceptual framework is brought to life through coordinated administrative mechanisms that put the system in place. According to research from the OECD, high quality services are more likely when there is a common policy framework with consistent infrastructure across the whole ELCC system. Infrastructure is by its nature a government function although it is appropriate to involve other key players - from parents to children to researchers - in some parts of the process.

A Canadian consensus (and indeed, an international consensus) is emerging that the traditional split between "care" and "education" with its duplication and fragmentation for children and parents no longer makes sense given knowledge of how children develop and the needs of today's families. The wisdom of coordinated policy development, planning and program administration for ELCC have been identified in the policy literature and is the norm in many other countries.

As well as this "horizontal coordination", the political arrangements of the Canadian federation require us

also to consider "vertical coordination" among the different levels of government – federal, provincial/territorial and local. Foundational federal legislation would be an important part of a coordinated approach.

In Canada, provincial/territorial child care legislation, regulations and non-legislated guidelines and policy are the basis for service delivery. They define services covered, age groups served, operators of services and their legal obligations, financing, program standards such as staff training, physical space requirements, monitoring and consultation and sanctions for non-compliance. They could be strengthened as well as expanded to include mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement and program assessment.

4 Planning and policy development

A strategy for implementation that includes…

- System wide planning with targets and timetables
- Use of the best available knowledge regarding policy and practice
- Critical mass of knowledgeable policy makers
- Mandated involvement of experts and stakeholders in policy processes at all levels
- Local service planning

System-wide planning at the provincial/territorial level is critical for successful implementation of the conceptual framework. For system planning to be effective, it must be carried out by knowledgeable policy makers who have adequate resources to dedicate to good policy development. The involvement of ELCC experts and other stakeholders such as parents, early childhood educators and unions will both strengthen the planning and policy process and provide a broad range of support for ELCC; as the OECD proposed, it should be "given a legal and obligatory status. "

A strategic plan should:

- articulate goals;
- establish targets and timelines for achieving each target;
- identify strategies for reaching targets;
- provide benchmarks and reference points for determining progress toward meeting goals;
- define roles and responsibilities;
- and identify budget allocations and how they will be obtained

Regular monitoring and review of progress is critical and should be done on a regular schedule with

mechanisms for modifying goals and strategies as indicated.

5 Financing

Substantial well-directed public investment that includes...

- Financing for capital development
- Sustained financing sufficient to support ongoing program operation
- Core funding that covers the majority of program operation costs
- Financing for infrastructure and training
- Affordable parent fees

Policy research and analysis of practice show that good ELCC quality requires an adequate level of funding for operation of the program, for good facilities and equipment, for staff training, infrastructure, and an effective support infrastructure. A significant public investment is essential to provide stability for programs while keeping fees affordable for parents.

Public funding must be substantial enough to finance capital costs; to cover all or most of the cost of program operation so that if there are parent fees, they are affordable by families across the income spectrum; and to ensure adequate infrastructure and training at all levels. According to the OECD, "Only the regular funding that state investment brings is able to guarantee access and quality on a fairly equitable basis for all groups."

In addition to the *amount* of public funding, policy issues arise concerning *how* it is used. These involve questions of efficiency, accountability and equity.

Questions that are frequently raised regarding how public funds should be spent include:

- Should public money be delivered on the demand-side so parents can purchase care for their child (subsidies, tax credits, or vouchers) or on the supply-side, providing public funds to fund the cost of operating the program?

- Should there be a user cost - a parent fee? If so, how much of the cost should be paid by parents, and should all parents pay the same fee or should fees be geared to income?

Arguments made for demand-side funding such as vouchers or fee subsidies are primarily associated with "parent choice" and with the idea that ELCC is a commodity in the marketplace. Proponents claim that parents will know best how and what kind of ELCC (if any) to purchase for their child and that this is an area in which government should not play a significant role.

Arguments made for supply- side funding - that is, funding that goes directly to programs to cover all or some of their operating costs - emphasize that ELCC is a "public good" and that this is the best way to ensure public accountability, that is, to ensure that that public ELCC funds are used for high quality ELCC. This perspective also states that provision of services is necessary if parents are to have a choice.

The OECD notes that supply-side funding provides greater stability to programs with, in return, greater control by the government over planning, size and location of services, quality levels and evaluation and data collection.

6 Human resources

Qualified personnel and support that includes...

- Leadership at all levels (policy, supervisory, educational and program)
- A critical mass of knowledgeable policymakers, post-secondary early childhood instructors and researchers
- Post-secondary level training in early childhood with lead staff at degree levels
- Human services management training for program supervisory staff
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Good wages
- Working conditions that encourage good morale and low turnover
- System support for program level staff
- Support, respect and recognition for the value of the work

The human resources — the people — who make up an ELCC system include frontline early childhood educators, family child care providers, centre directors, program managers, local, provincial/ territorial and federal policymakers, post secondary early childhood instructors, researchers and experts. In all of these categories, leadership, innovation, creativity and a strong knowledge base are foundational. As ELCC programs in Canada expand and expectations for their achievements grow, the complexities of providing high quality programs will require highly skilled people at all levels.

It is fundamental that high quality ELCC programs have staff that are well educated in early childhood education, skilled, competent, well respected and well remunerated. The considerable body of research supporting this comes from Canada, the United States and other countries. There is evidence of strong associations between high quality child care and the wages and working conditions, post secondary education in early childhood education, and job satisfaction of staff. Strong pedagogical leadership and competent human resources management at the centre level is is important for supporting, nurturing and developing the staff team and implementing the reflective practices known to improve quality.

The interactions between staff and children and the environment created by staff contribute to positive early child development and children's well-being. In turn, high quality programs for children contribute to good working environments for staff, which help attract and retain a qualified workforce.

In *Starting Strong*, the OECD notes that:

> *Quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession. There is a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially viable.*

As provincial/territorial governments in Canada develop plans to increase the supply of regulated child care, a coordinated human resources plan will be essential to ensure the skilled workforce necessary to support the development of quality programs.

 Human resources plans will need to address the high turnover of ELCC staff through a recruitment and retention strategy, changes to the low wages and poor benefits in much of the sector, the need for additional pre-service and ongoing education and training for both front-line staff and supervisors, a body of knowledgeable early childhood instructors at the post secondary level, educating at the post graduate level a body of researchers and policy experts working in the various disciplines associated with ELCC (child development, education, sociology, economics, political science), and public education to increase public awareness of the value of the work of caring for young children.

At the provincial/territorial, federal and local levels there will be a need for a critical mass of experienced policy makers knowledgeable in ELCC to design, implement and monitor strategic plans.

7 Physical environment

The program setting that includes...

- Sufficient well-designed indoor and outdoor space
- First-rate equipment and program resources
- Amenities such as staff room, outside play space, kitchen, windows for natural light
- Connections to the surrounding community

Elements of ELCC environments such as amount of space, access to the outdoors, arrangement of rooms, availability of a variety of materials, air quality, equipment, and lighting play a role not only in safety and health but in children's well-being, happiness and creativity, their learning to live in and with the natural environment and their cognitive and social development. In addition, elements of the physical environment such as how easy or difficult it is to carry out a program in, whether there are physical amenities that support staff — a staff room and adequate program resources — and whether the nature of the facility conveys that early childhood education is a respected, valued career have an impact on the morale of the people working in the program and, thus, on the quality of the program. In addition — as some commentators have pointed out — as children are the least powerful stakeholders, it is important to find ways to involve them in considering ELCC's physical environments.

Supporting good physical environments means not only high standards or regulations regarding, for example, the number and placement of toilets, windows, exit doors, kitchen and food preparation requirements, placement of sinks for hand washing, height of fencing although these are clearly important and cannot be overlooked. In addition to these basic health and safety considerations, today there is considerable interest in and knowledge concerning design and architecture of children's environments with emphasis on creativity, physical activity, social and cognitive development, aesthetic considerations, and how the physical environment can support rather than hinder implementation of excellent early childhood programs and ensure their visibility as a valued community institution.

8 Data, research and evaluation

Collection and analysis of information for evaluating effective practice and ensuring accountability that includes...

- A strategy for collecting and analyzing basic data to monitor effects of policy and financing and ensure accountability
- Research agenda to address key policy and program issues
- Evaluation of various approaches and innovations
- Regular review of progress towards goals

Regularly collected Canadian data about the availability and characteristics of ELCC programs, their utilization, unmet service needs, families, and the characteristics and educational levels of the workforce is incomplete and inconsistent across jurisdictions.

The basic data that should be gathered to support planning and resource allocation include, for example, measures of demographic demand, actual usage, availability of spaces by age, attendance patterns of different age groups, availability of spaces by geographic area, nature of facilities, progress of children with special needs, the levels of training of staff, staff turnover levels and fees in comparison to average family incomes in the same geographic area. It is also necessary to collect contextual data such as child population, use of maternity/parental leave, parental labour force participation, poverty and language. A data strategy requires on-going dedicated funding and designated personnel whose function is to coordinate and analyze the different strands of information.

Strong basic data will contribute to effective monitoring at the system level to track whether policies are meeting their intended purpose, to identify problems or emerging needs, and make adjustments as indicated. In addition, evaluation of specific initiatives and programs is required as program and policy developments proceed.

Finally, a well-defined long-term multidisciplinary research agenda and a program of research will contribute to effective ELCC programs and policies at the system and at the program level as well as to the Canadian knowledge base about their effects on children, families, women, communities and the larger society.

Documentation

The following includes the documents that inform each element. Please visit www.childcarequality.ca for links to online documents. Contact CRRU to access documents available only in print (abstracts are available online for most print materials). Materials are listed by element from most recent to oldest.

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This document is based on the best currently available research and policy analysis. The key documents related to each element – some referred to in the text – are included to promote and enhance knowledge, discussion and debate. The conception of a high quality ELCC system described in this document was developed over the course of the *Quality by Design Project* and its series of site visits across Canada, meetings with child care officials and community and discussion among the QBD "team". The outstanding "team" has included Kathleen Flanagan Rochon, Brenda Goodine, and Cathy McCormack from PEI, Kathy Reid and Joanne Burkett from MB, Deborah Bryck and Cindy Jeanes from SK, Rika Lange and Carol Ann Young from BC.

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Martha Friendly and Jane Beach

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Elements of a high quality early learning and child care system

Ideas

Governance

Infrastructure

Planning and policy development

Human resources

Financing

Physical environment

Data, research and evaluation

quality by design

ABOUT THE QUALITY BY DESIGN PROJECT
www.childcarequality.ca

The Quality by Design Project is intended to promote and inform discussion, debate and knowledge about quality in early learning and child care (ELCC). This project builds upon previous work to broaden and deepen Canadian approaches to quality in ELCC. It is intended to contribute to quality as Canada's new national ELCC program - framed by the "QUAD" principles of Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental [ness] - develops.

CHILDCARE RESOURCE AND RESEARCH UNIT

www.childcarecanada.org

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) at the University of Toronto is a policy research facility that focuses on early learning and child care (ELCC). CRRU's mandate is to carry out and disseminate research and policy analysis, to support ELCC research in various disciplines, to provide education, resources and expertise on ELCC policy, research and programs and to play a role in shaping public policy. CRRU produces several kinds of publications and maintains a comprehensive ELCC resource collection and a extensive website that acts as a clearinghouse for the ELCC field.