Quality by design: What do we know about quality in early learning and child care, and what do we think? A literature review

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Introduction

Quality by design

Quality by Design is an exploratory project of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto. It is intended to stimulate dialogue about quality early learning and child care (ELCC) in Canada, focusing primarily on the policy or system level rather than at the level of individual programs. The project aims to encourage debate about the current ELCC situation in Canada, to broaden knowledge about best practices in policy and to stimulate further thinking about the best ways to simultaneously care for young children and support their families.

This literature review is one part of the *Quality by Design* project. It reviews the literature on ideas, research, policy and practice vis-à-vis quality in ELCC and is as much about what we think as what we know. The literature represented is drawn from three main sources: the relatively small number of Canadian research and policy documents pertinent to quality issues; the empirical research literature which is primarily from the United States and tends to be focused at the individual program level; and the policy analysis literature, much of which comes from western Europe and is for the

most part concerned with conceptions of quality and quality at the system level. Thus, while the *Quality by Design* project focuses on quality at the system-wide policy level rather than at the level of individual programs, the literature reviewed is concerned both with the individual program level and the system, or policy, level.

For the purposes of this review, ELCC is defined as learning and care services provided outside the child's home for children under age six[1] that support both young children's well-being and development and their parents' activities in and out of the paid labour force. This definition encompasses child care centres, family child care homes, kindergartens, preschools/nursery schools and early intervention programs such as Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs for children defined as high risk. The term "early learning and child care" or ELCC is used here to reflect current usage in Canada; the term means the same as "early childhood education and care", "high quality child care", and "early

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[1] While child care for children older than six years is as important as that for 0-6 year olds, this literature review is concerned only with early learning and child care for 0-6 year olds.

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childhood education". The majority of the literature reviewed however, especially that from North America, is primarily concerned with full-day centre-based programs.

The Canadian policy context: Why is quality an important topic now?

The social policy environment in 2004 and 2005 has been exciting for early learning and child care in Canada as social issues and spending on social programs have returned to the national agenda. For the first time, a political promise to improve child care – made in the 2004 federal election by the Liberals – has moved beyond the commitment stage. In 2004, the Liberals promised that if elected they would put a national early learning and child care (ELCC) system in place. This program – the "Foundations" program - was to be built over a period of some years in collaboration with the provinces/territories. The election platform said that it would be based upon four principles – Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental (programming) or the "QUAD" (Liberal Party of Canada, 2004: 29). After the 2004 election, early learning and child care remained a high priority for the minority Liberal government. In the spring of 2005, the federal government began to sign bilateral agreements with provinces to begin to put the ELCC program in place; the March federal budget committed to $5 billion over five years and work began in the provinces to enhance their child care programs[2].

The international arena too has had an important role in shaping the current Canadian ELCC policy environment. Motivating the current context has been the keen interest in ELCC internationally. This interest has taken a number of forms and has been generated by the capacity of early learning and child care programs to contribute to achieving a wide variety of societal goals such as lifelong learning, women's equality, social integration, amelioration of poverty and economic prosperity.

Work carried out by the Education and Training Division of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) exemplifies the international interest. The OECD's review of Canadian ELCC was the 17th in a multi-country Thematic Review conducted by the Paris-based economic organization between 1998 and 2005. One of the project's key summary documents noted that, "Policy makers have recognized that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families" (OECD, 2001: 7). In Western Europe, the European Community has had a strong interest in early learning and child care since the 1980s and in the 1990s, the European Commission's Childcare Network carried out extensive exploration of the dimensions and features of quality in child care (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004[3]).

In the past twenty or so years, there has been considerable discussion about high quality child care in North America as well. As a result, there is abundant peer-reviewed research literature and many empirical studies of characteristics, correlates, assessments and measurement of quality. One conclusion of this work is that "quality matters" – that is, ELCC programs can have positive effects if the services are high quality; poor quality programs may even have a negative effect. The research on this topic is strong, at least for older preschool-age children; research on ELCC programs for infants and toddlers (children under age two to three years) is less conclusive. The research shows that the quality of ELCC services is critical in determining how developmentally effective they are. Indeed, "the positive relation between childcare quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science" (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2001: 313).

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[2] As this paper went to press, another federal election (January 23, 2006) resulted in a Conservative minority government. Part of their platform included cancelling the child care agreements with the provinces. For more information about this, see the CRRU website at childcarecanada.org.

[3] The quality papers produced by the Childcare Network in the 1990s have been reproduced, with the permission of the European Commission, by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit as part of the *Quality by Design* project. They are available online at www.childcarecanada.org.

Whereas the European literature has focused primarily on the ideas that underpin the concept of quality and the kinds of policy initiatives needed to achieve high quality programs, the empirical research has mainly been carried out in jurisdictions where child care is more a collection of individual programs than a system. This research has generally been concerned with quality at the level of the individual program.

Reviewing and considering the experiences of other countries can provide an effective lens through which to view the Canadian situation and an opportunity to learn from the experiences, successes and challenges of others. At the same time, the approach in any society is the product of its particular values and history, its social, economic and political context and its conception of what childhood is and its ideas about the purpose of ELCC programs. There is no "off the shelf" model or summary of best practices that automatically fits multiple contexts and hence is suitable for replication "as is" from one society to another. Thus, each country must either consciously design its early learning and child care system or settle for what emerges by default.

Section 1. IDEAS ABOUT QUALITY

At a Canadian conference on child care quality in June 2005, two prominent international researchers offered insights into conceptions of quality in child care. The first, Bengt-Erik Andersson, a developmental psychologist at the Swedish Institute of Education, presented his concept of high quality child care using parts of the Swedish Parliament's vision and goals[4] for

its children in the nation's preschool program as follows:

Selected goals from the Swedish preschool curriculum

Norms and values

The preschool shall influence and stimulate to develop an understanding of our society's common democratic values and gradually embrace them.

Goals: The preschool shall in each child try to develop:
- Open-mindedness, respect, solidarity and responsibility
- An ability to show empathy and consideration and a will to help other people
- An understanding that all people have the same value independent of sex and social and ethnic background

Development and learning

The activity in preschool shall be characterized by an education where care, fostering, and learning form a whole. The activity shall promote play, creativity, and joyful learning and utilize and strengthen the children's interest to learn and win new experiences, knowledge, and skills.

Goals: The preschool shall in each child try to develop:
- Identity and security
- Curiosity and desire an ability to play and learn
- Independence and confidence in its own ability
- A sense of participation in its own culture and respect for other cultures

(Cont. next page)

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[4] The goals above are selected from Dr. Andersson's presentation, available online at http://www.excellence-

earlychildhood.ca/documents/Bengt_Erik_Andersson_ANG.pdf, as illustrative. His presentation was drawn from the much more comprehensive Swedish Preschool Curriculum, available online at http://www.childcarecanada.org/res/papers/SwedishCurriculumPreschool.pdf

Children's influence

In the preschool the children's understanding of democracy starts. Their social development presupposes that they are given responsibility for their own acts and for the preschool environment according to their capacity.

Goals: The preschool shall in each child try to develop:
- Its capacity to be responsible for its own acts and for the preschool environment
- Its ability to understand and act after democratic principles by participating in different kinds of cooperation and decision making (Andersson, 2005)

Thelma Harms, professor at the University of North Carolina's Frank Graham Porter Research Center, began her plenary presentation with a second conception of high quality child care. Recognizing that quality is a multi-dimensional concept, she identified the three basic goals for children in child care as:

- Protection of children's health and safety

- Nurturing emotional and pro-social development

- Providing intellectual stimulation through play and hands-on activities (Harms, 2005).

These two conceptions may or may not be worlds apart or they may – on further analysis – have more in common than appears initially. There are certainly differences between them: first, in who has developed them. Andersson was presenting Swedish government policy – an official vision – whereas Dr. Harms was presenting her own conception as in the United States there is no official child care vision or goals for children associated with a national preschool program. Second, there is certainly a difference in how much detail they include and third, they play different roles in the design, financing and assessment of ELCC programs. Finally, they reveal some fundamental differences in the ways in which child care, childhood and children are conceptualized.

Is there a Canadian vision for early learning and child care?

One characteristic that has distinguished Canada from countries with more developed ELCC systems is the absence of a clearly articulated pan-Canadian vision or specified goals. In the past two decades or so, Canadian rationales for ELCC have swung back and forth from life-long learning, school readiness and child development to employability, to women's equality, balancing work and family, reducing poverty, alleviating at-risk status and social integration (Friendly, 2000). While these can be categorized into four broad policy goals – child development/lifelong learning, parent employment, social integration and equity[5] – neither nationally nor provincially has there been the kind (or kinds) of "published and coherent statement of intent for care and education services to young children from birth to six years… set [ting] out principles, specify[ing] objectives and defin[ing] objectives" as recommended by the European Commission Childcare Network in the 1990s (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004: 12). Of course, under Canadian constitutional arrangements, provinces/territories in Canada – not the national government – have the jurisdictional responsibility for ELCC programs and policy. But the provinces/territories have not developed coherent long-term visions for early learning and child care either. In the OECD review of Canada, the international expert team[6] commented on this:

> *We propose recommendations to stimulate discussion among governments, policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders…This we believe is a first task, both at federal and provincial level: to sit down together to conceptualize a coherent, long-term vision for each province and country as a whole, based on the best available evidence and prioritized into defined steps and time frames* (OECD, 2004: 69).

[5] These four broad goals are described in more detail on the CRRU website at www.childcarecanada.org
[6] The expert team members for Canada's OECD review were from the UK, Belgium (Flemish community), Finland and from the OECD, based in Paris.

While the early learning and child care program begun in 2004 has a set of principles – the "QUAD" – as yet, the implementation plan based on best available evidence with targets and timetables is still at the very beginning of development (see footnote [2])

Different players, different perspectives

Ideas about quality in early learning and child care vary depending on the values, beliefs and cultural/social context and needs of the individual or group making the judgment. As Lillian Katz (1999) has described, at one level these ideas are determined by the perspective of the particular player or stakeholder. For example, a child's definition of quality may be a program where he or she feels accepted, emotionally comfortable and finds the activities interesting and engaging rather than boring or frustrating. Some researchers such as Alison Clark in the UK have devised ways of involving children as young as three years old in developing and commenting on their own environments (Clark, 2005). Most often though the child's perspective is determined indirectly through observations or is assumed by assessing outcomes.

Parents may view quality as a situation that safeguards their child's health and safety, where their child is happy and is both conveniently located and affordable. Or parents may define a high quality ELCC program as one that prepares their child for school by incorporating a range of visible and tangible "school readiness" activities – pre or early reading or even learning a second language. Parents are a far from uniform group. Mothers may have very different views from fathers and parents from different social classes or ethnic groups may have different and even divergent ideas about the characteristics of quality in ELCC programs. And it is important to keep in mind that – as parents in Canada are often not in a position to "choose" their child care due to shortages or unaffordable cost – parents even within one program may have very different ideas about what quality is or should be.

Meanwhile, program staff – early childhood educators – may define quality, in part, by the extent to which relationships among co-workers are supportive, whether the physical setting assists rather than impedes doing the work well

(for example, whether there is a staff room and well-equipped, attached outdoor space), and how well the values, philosophy and approach of the program match those learned in a college level early childhood education training program. Early childhood professionals who have gained their knowledge about children and early childhood in post-secondary institutions are more likely to have common ideas about quality than do parents.

For the community – whether it is a geographic community or a community of shared interests and concerns such as an Aboriginal or a Franco-Ontario community – a quality program is likely to be one that reflects and supports the values, beliefs, needs and aspirations of the community. These views too may not be uniform even within one community. For example, immigrant or refugee parents may have different views from others from their own country of origin about whether the early childhood program should maintain the traditional cultural approaches and language or whether a main purpose of the program is assimilation into Canadian culture.

Do different countries have different ideas about children?

> …*quality is a relative concept, based on values and beliefs…*(Balaguer, 2004: 8).

Different countries – even those that are geographically or politically close to each other – often have different traditions and different conceptions of early childhood. Thus, the perceptions of what constitutes quality in ELCC may or may not also vary across countries or cultures, reflecting different cultural values, social contexts, concepts of childhood and views of the role of ELCC.

To some extent at least, these differences are connected to broader social and political ideas such as those about gender and religion, redistributive policies, welfare regimes and the role of government. At least as fundamental, however, are ideas about children and what is called "the social construction of childhood" – that is, what it means to be a child and what the purposes of childhood are. One pole of these ideas has been described by Cohen, Moss, Petrie and Wallace who draw on the work of American education expert Christopher Jenks:

By implication, the child is an adult in waiting, representing potential human capital to be realized: he or she is that which is yet to be, a 'structured becoming'. This process of becoming entails linear progress as the child passes through successive, orderly and predicted 'developmental' or 'key' stages. Each stage of childhood is preparation or 'readying' for the next and more important stage with early childhood devalued for its immaturity yet recognized as a necessary foundation for progression, culminating in the completeness that is attained in the stage of adulthood. The child, therefore, is defined as lacking, deficient, passive, incomplete, underdeveloped – and the more she is so defined, the younger she is (2004: 38).

In contrast, the same authors draw from Swedish analysts Lenz Taguchi and Munkammer to describe the contemporary view of childhood dominant in Sweden:

The child is a citizen with rights and a voice that should be listened to…. He or she is an autonomous, self-determining, competent and active child. He or she is actively seeking to understand the world and as such is a co-constructor of knowledge and identity. She is responsible for her own learning, a child whom, the curriculum stipulates, should with her teacher plan her school day and evaluate her own work and learning (Cohen et al, 2004: 39).

How these ideas are played out can be seen in the early learning and child care programs in the United States and Sweden. As Cohen et al describe, in the United States, childhood is generally viewed as a preparatory stage and children as adults-in-training whose value lies in the possibility that they will contribute in the future to the society socially and economically. An ELCC program's quality may be judged by the extent to which it has the right characteristics to contribute to producing children who are 'school ready.' Thus an important part of the role of people working in the setting is transmission to the children of specific skills, knowledge and cultural expectations.

In contrast, Swedish society takes a more children's rights approach to value early childhood as an important stage in its own right; that is, it is not merely a period of preparation for adulthood. This conception is not only described in the quotation from Cohen et al above but also in the national Swedish Preschool Curriculum cited by Bengt-Erik Andersson at the June 2005 Canadian conference. According to these ideas, a Swedish preschool program's quality would be viewed in part by the extent to which children are listened to and engaged in debate and activities that children enjoy and stimulate them to question and problem-solve. In these programs, the role of the staff is more to mobilize children's curiosity, provide a variety of learning opportunities, and participate with the children as a co-constructor of knowledge through dialogue and shared experiences than to transmit predetermined skills and knowledge (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Moss, 2004).

In addition, in the Swedish approach adults serve as role models for children as they come to understand democratic values:

The foundation on which these values rest expresses the ethical attitude that shall characterize all pre-school activity. Care and consideration towards other persons as well as justice and equality in addition to the rights of each individual shall be emphasized and made explicit in all pre-school activity. Children shall assimilate ethical values and norms primarily through their concrete experiences. The attitudes of adults influence the child's understanding and respect for the rights and obligations that apply in a democratic society. (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 2001: 7)

While these two descriptions of views of children and early childhood are probably at the two extremes conceptually, in actuality, neither the ideas nor the actual practice are likely to be black and white.

Common ideas about quality

Clearly, while there is no single universal definition of quality ELCC, there are some values so critical to the well being of children that they are universally perceived to be the foundation of any definition of quality. In a

paper originally published in 1996, Balaguer, Penn and Mestres point out that

> …assumptions about what children need and how adults might provide it have varied widely even this century. Very generally there is a consensus in much of the current child development and education literature that children need to feel loved, respected and listened to; that they are sociable and enjoy the company of other children and adults besides their immediate family; and that through affection, through social intercourse and with a stimulating environment, they mature, learn and develop a remarkably wide range of skills and competencies in the first five or six years (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004: A19).

The experience of the European Commission Childcare Network in collaborating to develop common "quality targets" in the mid 1990s is a significant one for Canada. The members of the Network (one from each country in the European Union) – in response to a European Union Recommendation on Childcare in 1992 – worked for several years to formulate common targets for ELCC programs or "services for young children", as they termed them. Moss describes the result (republished by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit in 2004): as "a unique document, identifying shared principles and goals, while at the same time recognizing important differences of tradition, culture and values" (2004: 3).

The Childcare Network suggested that the forty quality targets[7] – covering topics ranging from the responsibility for infrastructure, to educational philosophy, to the right of access for children with disabilities, to diversity, to food preparation – were achievable within ten years. While this has not been fully achieved across the countries of the EU, Jan Peeters (2004) of Belgium's Flemish Community writes that they have had an important influence on thinking about quality, that they stimulated research and

policy analysis on quality and initiated a cross-national discussion for the first time.

Balaguer – one of the authors of the discussion papers that served as the basis for discussion about the targets – notes, "the process threw up areas where differences could not be resolved. But it also defined a large measure of consensus about services for young children…" (2004: 8). In spite of the wide range of political ideologies and cultures (including, among others, Greece, France, Denmark and Great Britain), the targets are quite detailed, for example, there is a target for public expenditure on ELCC services: (for children aged 5 and under), "not less than one percent of GDP", a capital spending target: "there should be a capital spending programme for building and renovations linked to the environmental and health targets"; and a target that states that "staff should regularly assess their performance, using both objective methods and self-evaluation" (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004: C16, C39). Almost ten years after the targets were originally published by the Childcare Network, ELCC experts from across the EU have been reevaluating them as a tool for improving quality; an issue of *Children in Europe* (September, 2004) has been devoted to this.

Considering the literature on quality more widely than the consensus that was developed among the countries of the European Union, individual documents from countries as diverse as England, Germany, Grenada, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal and the United States all identify the following as critical components of quality programs: (1) safety; (2) good hygiene; (3) good nutrition; (4) appropriate opportunities for rest; (5) promotion of equality of opportunity regardless of gender or other differences; (6) opportunities for play and for the development of motor, social, language and cognitive skills; (7) positive interactions with adults; (8) encouragement and facilitation of emotional growth; and (9) an environment and practices that support positive interaction among the children (Doherty, 1999). Of course, how "safety" and "good hygiene" are defined vary depending upon the expectations and resources of the country.

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[7] The complete forty quality targets can be found in *Children in Europe*, September 2004: 12-15 or online at www.childcarequality.org.

The process of defining quality

One of the important lessons learned from the EC Childcare Network's policy research is about the *process* of conceptualizing and defining quality. One of the key points of the discussion paper upon which the original cross-national exercise was based was that

> *Defining quality is an inherently value-based exercise. This means that there will never be a total consensus. The aim of the paper is to explore to what extent there may be a 'core' area of shared values and actions arising from them, where consensus or near consensus may be achieved* (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004: A7).

What followed, then, was a process of informed discussion to achieve collaboration on the forty targets. Balaguer, in 2004, revisited the assumptions that guided this process, stressing that:

- Quality is a relative concept, based on values and beliefs;

- Defining quality is a process that is important in its own right and;

- The process should be continuous and democratic (2004: 8).

Quite similar ideas about the importance of the process in improving quality can be found in the OECD's Thematic Review of Early Learning and Child Care. One of the OECD's observations was that improving quality should be an ongoing process and an integral part of the policy process. The Thematic Review's 2001 summary report, *Starting Strong*, notes that

> *Governments [in the 12 OECD countries that initially participated in the Thematic Review[8]] promote quality improvement through framework documents and goals-led steering; voluntary standards and accreditation; dissemination of research and information; judicious use of special*

> *funding; technical support to local management; raising the training and status of staff; encouraging self-evaluation and action-practitioner research; and establishing a system of democratic checks and balances which includes parents* (OECD, 2001: 9).

And one of the "eight policy lessons" learned from the OECD's initial round of country reviews reflects in the importance of a "participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance" and states that

> *defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents, and children. There is a need for regulatory standards for all forms of provision supported by co-coordinated investment. Pedagogical frameworks focusing on children's holistic development across the age group can support quality practice* (OECD, 2001: 11).

Pan-Canadian and provincial/territorial ideas about early learning and child care

In the Canadian federation, ELCC is an area of provincial and territorial jurisdiction. In most jurisdictions, the two main components of ELCC, child care and kindergarten are the responsibility of different departments, viewed as having different purposes, operate under different legislation and receive different proportions of public funding. In general, public policy related to ELCC at both the federal and provincial/territorial levels is poorly developed, incoherent and constantly shifting as governments change. As documented in the Canada Background Report for the OECD Canada review, ELCC services in Canada are fragmented, often of dubious quality and characterized by unequal access (Doherty, Friendly and Beach, 2003). Although there have been a number of Canadian initiatives aimed at improving quality[9], most efforts to date aimed at improving the current situation have involved tinkering with what exists rather than comprising a comprehensive thinking through

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[8] A full description of the OECD's Thematic Review and links to the OECD documents can be found at the CRRU website at www.childcarecanada.org. It should be noted that a report summarizing the second round of reviews – in which Canada participated – is expected later in 2006.

[9] A selection of these Canadian quality initiatives is reviewed in another *Quality by design* working document *Canadian initiatives to improve quality* (In preparation).

what we want for our children, the purposes of ELCC, how ELCC programs should interact with other community services and the relative responsibilities of the State and families. Beginning in 1998, Québec had begun to implement a specific strategy for the development and public funding of a more coherent system of early childhood ELCC services (child care and kindergarten) than is found in other provinces; the policy falls within the context of a broader family policy with targets and timelines[10].

Some years ago, the National Children's Agenda and the subsequent Early Childhood Development Agreement (Federal-Provincial-Territorial Council of Ministers on Social Policy Renewal, 1999; Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2000) laid out a broad vision for supporting young children and their families and some key objectives were agreed to by almost all the provinces and territories.[11] However, neither of these two documents produced clearly articulated pan-Canadian goals specific to ELCC (Friendly, 2004) although both are understood to implicitly define quality programs as those that enhance children's school readiness.

As we described earlier, however, the situation for early learning and child care has undergone some important changes in the past few years. Beginning with the Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care in 2003 and gaining momentum with the beginning of the Foundations program, the idea of constructing a Canadian conception of quality in ELCC begins to seem not only more possible but also more pressing. Indeed, the agreements-in-principle that provide the first step to implementing the national early learning and care program include agreement to federal/provincial/territorial collaboration on "a national quality framework" (see, for example, the Manitoba agreement-in-principle)

(Government of Canada & Government of Manitoba, 2005) (see footnote [2]). As this paper will discuss in more detail in a later section, one of the lessons learned from what is known about early learning and child care policy is that a high quality ELCC *system* with coherent policies and adequate public funding is key to ensuring that high quality is the rule rather than the exception at the individual program level.

But what is quality? As we've described, all definitions of ELCC quality vary with the individual's perception. At a societal level they are inextricably linked with the society's concepts of the child, of childhood, the purpose of the programs, and the respective roles of the child's family and society.

Moss and Petrie (1997) and Moss (2004) note that when considering quality in ELCC – what it is and how best to obtain it – it is essential to ask the right questions. These critical questions are:

- What is our image of the child?
- What do we want for our children?
- What is the place of children and childhood in our society?
- What is our image of the purpose and role of ELCC programs?
- How should ELCC programs interact with other community services?
- What are the respective responsibilities of the State and the child's family?

From these ideas, a conception of the pedagogy, an approach to a curriculum (defined as a short general framework) and a plan for the system's human resources can flow. As noted earlier in the comparison of ideas about ELCC in the United States and Sweden, different answers to these important questions can result in programs that look and function differently from one another and embody different conceptions of the role of adults and the State so lead to different teacher training or different funding mechanisms.

Debating the kinds of crucial questions listed above and coming to some resolution would support the development of a Canadian vision for ELCC that indicates where we want to go, why, and for what purposes, for whom services should be provided, and how services should

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[10] Note that since Quebec began this process in 1997, election of a different government has lead to shifts in ELCC policy as noted above. For a description of Quebec ELCC policies, see Current development (Quebec) on line at http://www.childcarecanada.org/res/cdpt/pq.html

[11] Québec agreed in principle but because of concerns about infringement on its constitutional jurisdiction was not a signatory to these federal/provincial/territorial agreements.

be funded. These answers, in turn, would enable the development of coherent policies and a system grounded in clear concepts of childhood, the purpose of ELCC and the role of the State. As Moss and Petrie suggest, when the crucial questions are not addressed, a society inevitably experiences "periods of public neglect interspersed by spasms of political activity which fail to identify or address critical questions or issues about direction, purpose and concept because there is no shared or sustained vision" (1997: 2).

The issue of who should be involved – and how– in debating the questions, defining quality and developing a vision for ELCC is also critical. In a democracy such as Canada, the expected answer would be that all stakeholders should be engaged in the process – parents, children, workers in ELCC, national/provincial/territorial child care organizations, labour groups involved in ELCC, representatives from Aboriginal organizations and other community representatives such as business, post-secondary faculty in ECE training programs, the ELCC research community, and politicians and civil servants from all three levels of government.

As the original European Commission Childcare Network document noted, governments change and child care quality is not static. Therefore, defining quality needs to be a dynamic and continuous process, involving regular review (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004).

Summary

This section of the paper has focused on establishing the context for exploration of what is known and what we think about quality in early learning and child care and has presented some of the key literature concerned with the ideas that shape and determine its forms. The next section will present what is known from the literature about what contributes to quality in individual child care centres.

SECTION 2. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO QUALITY AT THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD CARE CENTRE LEVEL

Introduction

This section discusses the findings of research studies that are primarily Canadian and American regarding factors that contribute to quality at the level of the individual child care program, usually centres. To focus the discussion, it presents one vision or conception of quality. Generally speaking, current perceptions of high-quality programs in both countries have been based to a large extent on the ability of the program to produce children with certain skills deemed important for school readiness and generally, quality is rated on the basis of children's scores on measures of social, language and/or cognitive development or program scores on a measure of global quality such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998). The research reviewed here reflects these perceptions and quality measures.

One vision of quality at the individual child care program level

Taking into consideration the different needs, values, beliefs and cultural/social contexts of the individuals involved in ELCC – either as users or providers – and what the literature has identified as contributors to quality, Doherty (2004) has suggested the following characteristics of a high quality program looking at it at the level of an individual child care program.

- Each **child** feels accepted, understood, supported and respected by the adults, enjoys positive relationships with the other children and generally finds the activities provided interesting, engaging and satisfying rather than boring or frustrating;

- Each **parent**[12] including those, whose children have special needs, feels confident

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[12] The term parent should be understood to refer to a parent, guardian or other person who has primary responsibility for the child.

that the program protects his/her child's health and safety and promotes their optimal development. Parents receive regular feedback on the progress and the relationship between caregiver[13] and parent is experienced by parents as respectful of their culture and their goals and values for their child, supportive of their parenting role and collaborative rather than patronizing;

- The program is **affordable**, conveniently located near the parent's home or place of work or study and operates at convenient hours, for example, the hours required to cover the time the parent is engaged in work or study;

- The **relationships** among colleagues and with supervisors are experienced by each **caregiver** as respectful, cooperative and supportive and each caregiver feels that they and their work are valued and respected;

- The **work environment and working conditions** in the setting protect the caregiver's health and safety, and contribute to good morale and job satisfaction;

- The **indoor and outdoor space** is child-friendly, safe, aesthetically pleasing, accessible to people with disabilities and provides sufficient room for a variety of activities;

- There is a **daily, planned program** that exposes children to language and ideas, and provides many play-based opportunities for interaction with peers, exploration of the environment, experimentation and problem-solving.

What does research tell us? Summary of the North American research findings

A number of American and Canadian studies have reported the following variables as being predictive of or associated with higher quality in child care centres as measured either by

assessing child outcomes or on a standard measure of global quality such as the ECERS-R:

- Teaching staff with post-secondary ECE training;

- Teaching staff salaries at the high end of the continuum;

- A favourable ratio of staff to children;

- Non-profit auspice;

- Higher centre revenue and/or free or subsidized space received by the centre;

- A director with post-secondary ECE education;

- A positive organizational climate in the centre.

In addition, American research (Bowman, Donavan and Burns, 2001) has found that children's development is enhanced:

- By an approach to working with children that recognizes that social skills and physical dexterity influence cognitive development (just as cognition plays a role in the development of children's social understanding and motor competence) is based on a well-planned program in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across all domains and involves smaller groups of children.

- When teaching staff have been trained and are encouraged to reflect upon their own practice, the responses of the children to this, and to plan and revise their approaches and activities accordingly.

Canadian research identified in Table 1 (pg. 14) has also illustrated an association between the level of the director's salary and the quality rating received by the centre.

A closer look at the Canadian research and supporting American findings

Table 1 identifies Canadian research findings regarding the main contributors to centre quality as they are defined by ratings using standardized tools such as the ECERS-R or a new quality measurement tool developed in Quebec. In this table, the contributors are listed in the order of their apparent importance with those found to be predictors listed first. A

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[13] The term caregiver refers to adults who work directly with children in the provision of early learning and child care in a centre, family child care home or other service that provides a group program for young children in the absence of their parent such as a preschool or a family resource centre.

predictor (indicated by "P" on the table) is a variable where knowing its level - for example the level of the observed teacher's ECE education - enables prediction[14] of the level of another variable such as the score the room will receive on the ECERS-R. The key contributors to centre quality identified in the table are summarized below. (Selected studies other than the Canadian research listed in the table are also identified.)

The level of the observed teacher's ECE training

Higher levels of ECE training predicted higher quality ratings in a number of Canadian studies. In an analysis of the data from *You Bet I Care!* a major Canadian study, Doherty and Forer (2004) found that a centre's quality rating was predicted by whether or not the centre was located in a province/territory that required at least some teaching staff in every centre to have a minimum of two years ECE training.

The observed teacher's salary level

Higher levels predicted higher quality ratings in Canadian studies. American research has consistently identified low salaries as the major contributor to high teacher turnover rates in centres and showed that high staff turnover predicts low quality (Helburn, 1995; Whitebook, Howes and Phillips, 1990; Whitebook, Sakai and Howes, 1997). Earning a poor salary increases the likelihood that the teacher will also engage in other paid employment, thus reducing her time for rejuvenation from her child care work. More than 80% of Canadian child care centre teachers who engage in other paid work state that they do so to earn more money (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange and Tougas, 2000).

Ratio

Fewer children per teacher predict a higher quality rating. Statistical path analyses indicate that a favourable ratio enables the responsive adult: child interaction that favours child development (Howes, Phillips and Whitebook, 1992; Kontos, Hsu and Dunn, 1994).

Centre revenue level

Higher quality ratings are predicted in Canadian studies by free or subsidized rent. One

hypothesis is that having free or subsidized rent frees up funds that can be used for purposes such as hiring staff with higher levels of ECE training. Higher quality ratings are also correlated (associated) with higher parent fees and with a higher percent of centre revenue coming from recurring government funding (grants) other than fee subsidy, e.g. wage enhancement grants. These findings are consistent with those of American studies (Helburn, 1995; Scarr, Phillips, McCartney and Abbott-Shim, 1993). Both sources of income – parent fees and recurring government funding – contribute to higher centre revenues that can be used to pay higher staff salarie*s.*

Teacher degree of satisfaction with the level of co-worker support

This predicts quality level in pre-school rooms in Canadian studies. American research has also identified the importance of this and other aspects of the organizational climate (Jorde-Bloom, 1989; Jorde-Bloom and Sheerer, 1992).

Auspice

As a group, for-profit centres consistently obtain lower quality ratings than do non-profit centres. Auspice is also an indirect predictor of quality through its influence on staff wages (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange and Tougas, 2000; Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2005). Using the *You Bet I Care!* (YBIC) data set, Doherty, Friendly and Forer (2002) demonstrated that the lower quality ratings in commercial centres as a group do not simply result from their poorer access to government operating grants and to free/subsidized rent. Instead, they reflect behaviours such as hiring a higher proportion of untrained staff than non-profit centres in the same jurisdiction and program characteristics such as a higher number of children per teacher and higher staff turnover rates. Cleveland and Krashinsky's (2005) analysis of the YBIC data set found that while non-profit centres do better on every measure, differences were greatest in personal care provided to children, use of materials, activities and teaching interactions affecting language and thought development, staff interactions with children, level of staff communication to parents and support for personal and professional needs of staff. Higher quality in non-profits held true even when scores were adjusted to consider other factors that could affect quality, for example, the

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[14] Predictors are considered to be stronger indicators than correlates.

province where the centres are located and child population served, findings held even when other quality-contributing variables like financial resources and higher staff education in non-profits were taken into account.

Two major Québec studies – the Etude longitudinale du développement des enfants du Québec (or ELDEQ), which, like *YBIC* used the ECERS (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998) and the 2003 Grandir en qualité included in the chart, which used a Québec-developed four point quality scale, also found that for-profit centres scored lower than did non-profit centres (Japel, Trembly and Côté, 2004, 2005; Drouin, Bigras, Fournier and Bernard, 2004). There is also evidence that as a group, for-profit centres are less likely to provide services for children with special needs (*You Bet I Care!* unpublished data).

American studies including Whitebook, Howes and Phillips (1990) and Helburn (1995), show similar results.

The director's salary level

The influence of the director's salary has been reported in several Canadian studies. One researcher has suggested that part of the importance of salary level may be that it is perceived by the recipient as an indication of the extent to which she and her work are valued and hence affects morale (Helburn, 1995).

The director's level of ECE education

This has been reported in a number of Canadian studies as well as by an American researcher (Jorde-Bloom, 1989).

A descriptive analysis of a Canadian data set

Finally, an analysis of the data on quality was conducted for the *Quality by Design* project (Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2005). The purpose of this analysis was to obtain a picture of the characteristics of the "very best" centres, again using the *YBIC*! data set of 325 centres for children under age 6, each represented by an infant/toddler room or a preschool room. The quality rating on both scales is reported in a range between 1.0 and 7.0, with a score of 6.0 or above used to represent the very best level of quality and a score of 3.0 or below used to represent the worst level in this Canada-wide study. Thirty-one centres were in the category of

"very best" and 24 in the category of "very worst[15]."

The comparison of the two categories of centres is intended solely to be a descriptive profile to generate discussion and to provide additional information to that provided by the review of the research. The analysis was not intended to identify the location of the very best and very worst centres. But it is important to note that there are clear jurisdictional differences in the proportion of centres in each category and these differences are associated with the stringency of the provincial/territorial regulations. This finding is consistent with large American multi-state studies that have documented a relationship between weak regulations and a higher proportion of poor quality centres in the jurisdiction (Helburn, 1995; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999; Whitebook et al., 1990) and – as above in the paragraphs about the influence of auspice – clear differences the "the best" and "the worst" categories by auspice.

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[15] This descriptive analysis can be found online at www.childcarequality.ca

Table 1: **Key contributors to overall centre quality ratings: Canadian research**

Contributor	*You Bet I Care!* (Goelman et al.)		*Grandir en qualité* (Drouin et al.)		*Auspice Study* (Friesen)	*Atlantic Study* (Lyon & Canning)	*School-age Study* (Jacobs et al.)
	Infant/ toddler rooms	Preschool rooms	Infant/ toddler rooms	Preschool rooms	Under age 6	Preschool	School-age
Level of teacher ECE training	**P**	**P**	**C**	**C**	**C**	Trend	**C**
Level of teacher's salary	**P**	**P**	**C**	**C**	**C**	Trend	N/E
Ratio	**C**	**P**	**C**	**C**	**C**	No impact	**C**
Centre has free or subsidized rent	**P**	**P**	N/E				
Teacher's satisfaction with co-worker support	**C**	**P**	**C**	No impact	N/A		
Auspice	**C & ***	**C & ***	**T**	T	**C**	**C**	N/E
Level of parent fees	**C & ***	**C & ***	N/E				**C**
Director's salary level	N/E				**C**	**C**	**C**
Level of director's ECE education	N/E					**C**	**C**
Percent of revenue from gov't grants other than fee subsidy	**C**	**C**	N/E				

Sources: Drouin, Bigras, Fournier and Bernard (2004); Friesen, (1992); Goelman, Doherty, Lero, LaGrange and Tougas (2000), Jacobs, Mill and Jennings (2002); and Lyon and Canning (1995).

Key:
- **P** = Predictor, a variable where knowing its level, e.g. the teacher's level of ECE training, enables prediction of the level of a second variable, e.g. a room's score on the *ECERS-R*. Predictors are considered to be more powerful than correlates.
- **C** = Correlate, a statistically significant association between two variables that could not have occurred simply by chance, e.g. when variable A is present, variable B tends to be present.
- **Trend** = an association between two variables that fails to meet the level of statistical significance to be considered a correlate.
- **N/E** = not examined by the study in question.
- **C & *** = A statistically significant correlate that is also an indirect predictor of quality level, i.e. through its effect on wage level or the proportion of staff with ECE training

Policy implications

The key contributors summarized above and documented in Table 1 are all amenable to government action through public policy. As we noted above, American studies have documented a relationship between weak regulations and a higher proportion of poor quality centres in the jurisdiction. In addition, Canadian research has found that salary levels are higher in jurisdictions where centres receive government funding other than fee subsidies (Doherty et al, 2000). A higher proportion of teaching staff have an ECE credential in jurisdictions with higher regulatory requirements for such training (Doherty et al, 2000). Government financial assistance for basic ECE training increases the number of trained staff (Tougas, 2002). And – again from the American literature – the probability of a centre having a positive organizational climate increases when the director has specific training in the administration of child care centres (Jorde-Bloom, 1989; Jorde-Bloom and Sheerer, 1992).

The body of North American research on ELCC quality has identified common key contributors to high quality child care at the level of the individual centre as follows: (1) teaching staff with post-secondary ECE training; (2) teaching staff salaries at the high end of the continuum; (3) a favourable ratio of staff to children; (4) not-for-profit auspice; (5) higher centre revenue; (6) free or subsidized space; (7) the director's level of ECE education, and (8) a positive organizational climate in the centre. In addition, Canadian research has documented the importance of the director's salary level while the American research by Bowman et al (2001) cited earlier and a Swedish study (Andersson, 1999) also note the importance of self-reflection in teachers and a purposeful, planned approach to programming.

Again, it is important to reiterate that while each of these variables is important, none by itself dictates quality level. Like musical instruments in an orchestra, each works in concert with the others to provide a higher-quality product than any one of them could on its own.

All of these contributors are amenable to government action and provide guidance about how to improve quality at the individual program level though changes to policy at the system level. As Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, in their influential book *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Post modern perspectives* articulate this idea, early childhood programs:

> *have no inherent features, no essential qualities, no necessary purposes, what they are for, the question of their role and purpose, is not self-evident* **… they are what we make them** [italics added] (1999: 62).

Summary

This section has reviewed the key research literature – mostly from North America - that contributes to what we know about what affects quality at the level of individual child care centres using one mainstream definition of quality as a focus. The next section uses a schematic typology of the elements of a high quality ELCC *system* developed for the *Quality by Design* project to explore the literature about what makes a difference at a policy or system level.

SECTION 3. QUALITY AT THE SYSTEM LEVEL

The necessary conditions for quality

Although definitions of high quality sometimes vary across societies as a result of different perceptions of childhood and the purpose of ELCC, a general consensus has emerged in the early learning and child care literature that specific conditions are essential at the system level to ensure that high quality at the program level is the norm rather than the exception. There are many commonalities among these conditions across a diversity of countries with different histories, values, and circumstances. This consensus has emerged primarily from the policy research of two organizations: the work of the Training and Education division of the OECD through the Thematic Review of ECEC, the European Commission Network on

Childcare (European Union) which was composed of ELCC experts from 12 different countries[16] and the research of a variety of scholarly researchers.

In addition, the conditions or elements that are linked to quality need to be considered together – as a system. As Penn observed, "they [the essential conditions] all have to be addressed and their linkages established. Taken separately and without reference to each other, they lose their impact" (Penn, 1999: 2). Similarly, the OECD notes that, "these are related elements and should be considered as a totality" (OECD, 2001: 125). These necessary conditions are most often structural in nature: the OECD found that the major obstacles to ELCC quality found commonly across the countries they reviewed were structural failings – lack of adequate financing, unfavourable staff: child ratios, poorly qualified and poorly remunerated staff and inadequate pedagogical theory and implementation (Bennett, 2004). As noted in the previous section, public policy determines these structural elements.

Stated another way, it is a high quality early learning and child care *system* that is the key to ensuring that high quality early learning and child care programs are the rule rather than the exception. Thus, strong public policy is the basis for a high quality early learning and child care system. And the elements of a high quality ELCC system operate as a whole: that is, 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 (Friendly and Beach, 2005b).

This chapter identifies the necessary conditions emerging from the ELCC literature to be considered in the Canadian context. Table 2 provides a summary of the eight broad categories of elements of a high quality ELCC system that have been developed by the *Quality by Design* project[17]. This scheme provides a

useful framework for examining and reviewing the literature that relates to ELCC quality at a system level.

[16] The Childcare Network, like other official networks set up the European Commission, had a limited lifespan and was discontinued in 1996.

[17] The QBD elements were developed as a result of a series of site visits and meetings with government child care officials and community members in four Canadian jurisdictions and a series of topical discussions by the *Quality by Design* "team". The set of conditions has been presented, discussed (and consequently modified) at several ELCC conferences and meetings but should still be considered a work in progress.

Table 2 : **The elements of a high quality early learning and child care system**

Element	Includes
Ideas: A conceptual framework	A clear statement of the values that underpin the program System-level goals for children and families Educational philosophy related to the values and goals Curriculum defined as a short general framework
Governance: Roles and responsibilities	A clear definition of roles and responsibilities of government 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
Infrastructure: Coordinated program administration	Policy, planning and program delivery organized in one lead department Legislation as a basis for the system Regulation defining minimum basic standards Monitoring to ensure standards are met Mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement Ongoing consultation and program assessment Public education about early learning and child care
Planning and policy development: A strategy for implementation	System-wide planning with targets and timetables Use of the best available knowledge re: policy and practice Mandated involvement of experts and stakeholders in policy processes at all levels Local service planning
Financing: Substantial well-directed public investment	Financing to cover capital development Sustained financing sufficient to support ongoing program operation Core or base funding that covers the majority of program operation costs Financing for infrastructure and training Affordable parent fees
Human resources: Qualified personnel and support at all levels	Leadership at all levels (policy, supervisory, educational and program) A critical mass of knowledgeable policy makers, post-secondary early childhood instructors and researchers Post-secondary level training 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
Physical environment: The program setting	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 surrounding community
Data, research and evaluation: Collection and analysis of information for evaluating effective practice and ensuring accountability	A strategy for collecting and analyzing basic data to monitor effects of policy and financing and ensure accountability Research to address key policy and program issues Evaluation of various approaches and innovations Review of progress towards goals

The remainder of this section is devoted to discussing these eight elements that provide a framework for a high quality ELCC system and supporting literature associated with each element.

Element 1. The ideas: A conceptual framework

- A clear statement of the values that underpin the program

- System-level goals for children and families

- Educational philosophy related to the values and goals

- Curriculum defined as a short general framework

The conceptual framework begins with a statement that clearly articulates the values held by the society and what it wants for its children. This is the beginning of a definition of quality. A values statement is based on implicit societal values and beliefs about the nature of the child and childhood, and is coloured by the history, circumstances and context – economic and other – in which the society exists. Ideally, it is developed through a participatory process that involves broad discussion with all stakeholders about core values and beliefs and is periodically reviewed and amended to insure that if societal values and aspirations change, this is reflected.

Long-term goals at the system level support more detailed implementation of the values statement. These should include goals for children – what types of attitudes, skills and aptitudes we wish to encourage in them – such as those presented by Andersson (2005) described in the first section of this paper – as well as goals for families, goals for the community or society-at-large. Goals for specified groups such as women or children with disabilities are valuable for describing how important societal values such as women's equality and equity for people with disabilities will be furthered in an ELCC system.

As the OECD's work construes this, the system level goals should include: a brief outline of the broad goals for children such as the development of respect for diversity and the ability to work harmoniously with others. They should also include a summary of program standards, that is, how programs

should be structured to support the goals, for example, staff training qualifications (OECD, 2001; 2004).

The conceptual framework should include an explicit educational philosophy and framework to inform and support practice at the individual program level. The term 'educational' is used here in a broader sense than the formal transmission of specific knowledge to children through a detailed and prescriptive plan of instructional activities. Instead it refers to what is often called 'pedagogy,' the closest English translation of which is 'education-in-its-broadest-sense,' or, as Moss (2004) represents this idea, the development of the child through active involvement with the environment and others by exploring, questioning, experimenting and debating. An explicit educational philosophy and framework can serve several purposes: (1) promotion of an even level of quality across different forms of provision and age groups; (2) provision of guidance and support for staff in their daily practice; and (3) facilitation of communication between parents and staff (OECD, 2001; 2004).

A curriculum here is defined not as narrowly defined learning goals such as knowing how to count to 20 or the letters of the alphabet but as a general framework including an outline of the processes through which children achieve the desired outcomes, for example, through experiential learning, play-based approach, involvement with other children and adults, and the role of adults in these processes. As Bennett describes it, this would be "strong on guiding principles and structural requirements, but flexible…[Able] to adapt overall goals to special needs children, and to local needs and circumstances" and developed through broad consultation with stakeholders, including parents (Bennett, 2004: 18). The expectation is that the broad curriculum framework will be translated by staff and parents at the level of the individual setting while still being in line with the vision set out in the broad framework.

Element 2. Governance: Roles and responsibilities

- A clear definition of roles and responsibilities of government 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

From the perspective of the *Quality by design* project, governance in early learning and child care is concerned with 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?"

Responsibilities in an ELCC system 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 was suggested by the OECD (2004) in its Canada review. This implies that a public authority should manage functions such as finances, planning, training and professional development, and infrastructure although services may not necessarily be publicly delivered. While the details of the concept of public management of aspects of an ELCC system have not been explored in Canada, a good example of public management of ELCC finances in Canada can be found in the system that the City of Toronto has developed for ensuring accountability of funds through the fee subsidy system that is tied through data collection, analysis and program support to

quality criteria and program features (Toronto Children's Services, 2005).

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 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. Community members and parents can be involved with setting priorities, planning and quality assurance for a locally managed system. However, as Mahon (2004) 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 public or community-based non-profit operations, not businesses, is well grounded in Canadian, American and international research on quality. As Section 2 describes, there is considerable research on this topic in Canada and the United States. This literature, reviewed by Prentice (2005), shows that a variety of problems are associated with operating child care for profit with impacts on quality; this includes low wages, lower levels of ECE training, lower compliance with legislated requirements, poorer staff: child ratios and poorer morale. Policy research also points out other more conceptual aspects of this question. 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" (2005: 18). 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…" (2004: 76).

Element 3. Infrastructure: Coordinated program administration

- Policy, planning and program delivery organized in one lead department

- Legislation as a basis for the system

- Regulation defining minimum basic standards

- Monitoring to ensure standards are met

- Mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement

- Ongoing consultation and program assessment

- Public education about early learning and child care

The ideas or conceptual framework element is brought to life through a coordinated administrative approach to service provision – the Infrastructure. This sets out a program to implement the conceptual framework. According to the OECD's research (2001), countries are more likely to provide quality services when they take a systemic approach that entails a common policy framework with consistent goals across the whole ELCC system, for example, in regard to staffing and financing. Infrastructure is by its nature a government function although, as described above in the Governance element, it is important to involve a wide range of key players – from parents to children to researchers in a variety of processes.

The traditional jurisdictional split in Canada between 'care' and 'education' no longer makes sense given our current knowledge of how children develop and our growing understanding that care and education are inextricably linked. As research from a number of countries describes, this split impedes access, promotes fragmentation, results in duplication of costs and is counter-productive from a policy perspective since it results in a situation where policy makers in one department may make decisions that can be undone by the actions of the other department.

The negative consequences of the split between departments are exacerbated when different levels of government are responsible for and/or fund different parts of the early childhood system as they do in Canada or the United States. A multiyear American study addressed the issue of fragmentation of ELCC programs; its final report recommended major shifts in thinking about ELCC:

> *We must think of early care and education as a single seamless system, not as a set of disparate, categorical and idiosyncratic programs, and we must think of early care and education as encompassing family support and health, not only educational services for children* (Kagan and Cohen, 1997: 10).

Both the EU and the OECD have identified the need for coordinated policy development, planning and program administration (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004; OECD, 2001). This is now the norm in many other countries including the UK, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Spain and Sweden. The OECD Canada report recommended that Canada "build bridges between child care and kindergarten education, with the aim of integrating ECEC both at the ground level and at policy and management levels" (OECD, 2004: 6), suggesting that so doing would result not only in more coherent policy but greater consistency of experience for children, produce significant savings as the result of no longer needing separate planning and administration functions, and eventually lead to more coherent training and more equitable salary levels for people working in ELCC.

The recent experiences of integrating ELCC in Britain, Scotland and Sweden analyzed by Cohen et al (2004) suggests that departmental integration that makes a real difference requires more than merging responsibilities into one jurisdiction and making some structural changes. This analysis suggests that it will be 'business as usual' unless integration is accompanied by a re-conceptualization of the purpose(s) of ELCC, a recognition of existing and different departmental mindsets, values, cultures and traditions and the forging of a new vision and common policy principles and funding approaches.

According to these researchers, the different results in integrating responsibility for child care and kindergarten into a single department in England and New Zealand are instructive. In both countries, child care and kindergarten were viewed as having very different purposes with

corresponding differences in funding, staff training and salary levels. In the UK, interdepartmental integration was not a restructuring based upon or accompanied by a major re-conceptualization of ELCC but rather part of a reform concerned primarily with addressing specific problems through closer cross-sectional relationships. In this integration, neither the pre-existing view of child care as a private commodity to provide supervision while parents work nor the limited entitlement to child care has changed. The tendency to target populations perceived to be in need has not changed either and the low level of staff training required and limited public funding have remained the same.

In contrast, transferring responsibility for all ELCC services to the Ministry of Education in New Zealand was part of an education-focused reform process. Shortly after the restructuring, when the national government instituted a comprehensive consultation process to produce an early childhood curriculum, it involved both the child care and kindergarten sectors as well families from diverse backgrounds (Carr and May, 2000).

The result was *Te-Whāriki*, a national curriculum based on Maori culture that has been adopted by the government for use in child care, kindergarten and all other types of group programs for children under age six that emerges from the values, beliefs and context of the society. *Te Whāriki* has been credited with being a critical integrative concept that promoted acceptance of the departmental integration (Ministry of Education, 1996; Cohen et al, 2004). As a further part of integration, New Zealand has established a single funding framework with a common formula covering all ELCC services[18]. The government has also taken steps to integrate the ELCC workforce through new three-year post-secondary training leading to a diploma in early childhood teaching and to produce a Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education that proposes that by 2012 all staff in kindergarten and centre-based group programs will be required to have this qualification.

As well as this "horizontal coordination" between departments, in Canada, the political arrangements – a federation – mean that it is also imperative to consider the question of "vertical coordination" among the different levels of government – federal, provincial/ territorial levels and local levels. One approach to this that would fit the Canadian political context was suggested by the OECD in its Canada review – a secretariat responsible for young children at the federal level that could develop a general framework and standards for the whole country, provide on-going support for the work of the provinces and territories, build bridges across training regimes in the various jurisdictions, encourage common data collection and take the lead in the field of research and public education (OECD, 2004). Friendly (2004) suggests that such a secretariat could also coordinate strategies with other federal departments not involved in ELCC but with mandates that extend to young children and their families and facilitate knowledge sharing with and across the provinces and territories. In addition, she proposes a federal/provincial/ territorial ELCC working group to work with the federal secretariat and facilitate communication and policy development across the whole of Canada.

Resolution of these macro-coordination issues would permit the specific on-the-ground parts of program administration to work effectively to carry out the goals. An important basis for these is legislation at both federal and provincial/ territorial levels. The EU and the OECD have both identified a legislative framework as necessary components for an effective infrastructure able to support quality practice (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004; OECD, 2001).

In the Canadian context, provincial child care legislation acts as a framework for service delivery and all provinces/territories have legislation. It defines the services covered by the Act and its regulations, the purpose(s) of the services in terms of functions and age groups served, the permitted operators of the services and their legal obligations, program standards such as required staff training, accountability standards such as financial administration consistent with accepted accounting practices, and other government requirements, for example, submission of annual service plans.

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[18] While this framework provides child care centres with core funding, the funding system is not totally integrated since parents using child care still have to contribute to its cost while there is no parental fee for kindergarten

Provincial legislation also identifies the sanctions that will apply for non-compliance with regulations.

As the OECD has observed, legislation is critical for clarity, effectiveness and sustainability (2004). Canada, however, does not yet have federal legislation to establish an ongoing legislative framework for the new national child care program[19]. As the OECD noted in reviewing Canada:

> *We did observe that despite the Agreements, little net expansion in services has occurred in several provinces. In addition, weak quality continues to exist, and even in some instances, an erosion of community services had taken place. A more effective means of guaranteeing that expenditure adheres to the spirit of the Agreements may need to be legislated* (OECD, 2004: 75).

The broad approach to legislation that is suggested by this is different from the more detailed legislation of the provinces and is appropriate in a federation in which the provinces/territories have the jurisdictional responsibility for ELCC; it is, in fact, similar to the approach of the Canada Health Act.

Element 4. Planning and policy development: A strategy for implementation

- System-wide planning with targets and timetables

- Use of the best available knowledge re: policy and practice

- 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.

A strategic plan should:

a) articulate goals;

b) establish targets and timelines for achieving each target;

c) identify strategies for reaching targets;

d) provide benchmarks and reference points for determining progress toward meeting goals;

e) define roles and responsibilities; and

f) identify budget allocations and how they will be obtained.

Detailed strategizing and planning, which is essential, requires adequate guaranteed funding and a sufficient body of experienced administrators with strong ELCC professional backgrounds (OECD, 2004). Regular monitoring and review of progress is critical. Problems need to be identified and rectified early and inevitably there will be changes in needs and conditions during implementation that require consideration of the extent to which a new response is indicated (Moss and Penn, 1996).

In its review of ELCC in Canada, the OECD noted that strategic planning is limited and made a detailed recommendation about the content and process of provincial/territorial strategic planning. Illustrations of Canadian strategic planning can be found in the City of Toronto Service Plan (Toronto Children's Services, 2005) and the Manitoba Plan of Action (Government of Manitoba, 2005).

Another consideration is who participates in developing strategic plans. Consultation with people who have close contact with ELCC programs at the "front-line" or knowledge of ELCC research assists in relevant policy formulation based on research and an understanding of what exists in the field, and what is possible. 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 (2004) proposed, this role should be given a legal and obligatory status.

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[19]. However, the 2004 Liberal election platform included a commitment to "enshrine in legislation four principles for Foundations – the "QUAD" – quality, universality, accessibility, developmental" (online at http://www.liberal.ca/issues_e, retrieved September 1, 2005).

Element 5. Financing: Substantial well-directed public investment

- Financing to cover capital development

- Sustained financing sufficient to support ongoing program operation

- Core or base funding that covers the majority of program operation costs

- Financing for infrastructure and training

- Affordable parent fees

Both the EU's and the OECD's policy research found that quality requires an adequate level of funding for the provision of the service itself and for staff training, capital investment, and developing and maintaining an effective support infrastructure (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004; OECD, 2001). These studies agree that a heavy reliance on parent fees is insufficient and that substantial public investment is essential. 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" (2004: 73).

On the basis of their analysis of practice in the western European countries, one of the Childcare Network's quality targets was that countries should invest no less than 1% of their GDP on ELCC services for children under age 6 (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2004). In its review of ELCC in Canada, the OECD comments on the

> *generalized under-funding in the child care sector with respect to wages, learning materials, and infrastructure, both physical (premises, outdoor spaces) and the non-physical (the infrastructure of planning, administration, training, monitoring, evaluation, data collection …* (2004: 73).

Analysis of Canadian child care spending shows that in 2004, the range of provincial/territorial spending per regulated space was calculated to range from $816 in AB to $4,849 in QC; seven provinces spent less than $2,000 per regulated space. Moreover, six provinces/territories spent less per regulated space than they had in 2001 (Friendly and Beach, 2005a). Based on their assessment of the effects of underfunding on various elements of program quality, the OECD (2004) recommended that Canada considerably increase public funding for ELCC. A first step in this direction has been taken by the federal government's commitment of additional funds of more than $1 billion annually for ELCC beginning in 2005 (see footnote [2]).

In addition to the amount of public funding, policy issues arise concerning how it is used. These issues involve questions of efficiency and equity and maintaining public accountability for how public funds are used. As noted by Cleveland and Krashinsky (2004), efficiency in use of public funds for the provision of ELCC means getting the most services while ensuring high-quality, good accessibility and controlling costs. Questions that are frequently raised regarding *how* public funds should be spent include*:*

- Should public money be delivered on the demand-side (to individuals for purchase of the service, e.g. through subsidies, tax credits, or vouchers) or on the supply-side, that is by funding programs directly;

- Should there be a user cost? If so, what proportion of the cost should be borne by the user?

The arguments that are made for supply-side funding (funding that goes directly to the program to cover costs) include: the ability to ensure that public funds are used for quality ELCC; that is allows governments to be accountable for public funds; and the greater control supply-side funding gives governments over things like location of services and data collection. The OECD (2004) 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.

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. Demand-side funding can also be

associated with parents' use of unregulated child care because it is usually less expensive. It is harder for governments to be accountable for how the money was spent when using the demand-side approach. For example, governments can require recipients of a tax credit to submit an invoice stating that child care had been used but cannot make any judgement as to the quality of the service provided. Proponents claim that parents will know best how and what kind of ELCC (if any) to purchase for their child; it presumes that parents can accurately judge ELCC quality. This does not appear to be the case; American research has documented that in actuality parents often over-estimate the quality of their child care relative to objective measures such as the *ECERS*-R (Walker, 1991; Helburn, 1995; Mocan, 2001).

Finally, there has been little if any capital funding earmarked for development of child care facilities or even for equipment and furnishings in most of Canada. In its review of the state of ELCC in Canada, the OECD (2004) team specifically comments on the poor quality of the space and materials being used for the provision of ELCC and recommends that Canada make a concerted effort to provide attractive indoor and outdoor learning environments. Children and the adults working in ELCC settings spend a considerable period of their waking hours in the program's indoor and outdoor space and the well-being of both the children and the adults is influenced by the extent to which the physical environment provides sufficient, convenient and well-designed space for a variety of activities. As the more extensive section on Physical Environment (Element 7) discusses, there is evidence that ELCC environments play a role not only in safety and health but also in creativity, learning to live in and with the natural environment and cognitive and social development.

Element 6. Human resources: Qualified personnel and support at all levels

- 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 includes 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 (Doherty and Forer, 2004; Whitebook, Howes and Phillips, 1990; Barnett, 2003; National Research Council, 2001; Clark-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien and McCartney, 2002). 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 important to support, nurture and develop the staff team and to implement the reflective practices known to improve quality.

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 (2001: 11).

Canadian research has identified systemic barriers to both basic ECE training and to updating knowledge and skills through professional development such as cost, location of the program, a time conflict (hours in which training is offered and working hours of people in the field), difficulties transferring credits from one institution to another, and language and/or culture (Beach, Bertrand, Forer, Michal, and Tougas, 2004). At the same time, by international standards, current Canadian training requirements are low (OECD, 2001). American research by Whitebook shows

the evidence to date suggests that optimal teacher behaviour in centre-based settings, and the skill and knowledge upon which it rests, are best achieved through a four-year college degree, which includes, in most instances, some specialized content in early childhood education or child development (2003: 16).

Identifying the optimum content and length of training depends upon how the role of the early childhood worker is conceptualized, which in turn relates back to the purpose(s) of ELCC. For example, is the role simply to provide safety and nurturance for children in their parent's absence? Is it to do this and also transmit specific knowledge and skills through delivery of a precise curriculum? Is the adult expected to be a reflective co-constructor of understanding and skill development with the child? Each conceptualization requires different content and the necessary level of training increases with the complexity of the role. It takes much longer to develop an individual's ability to be self-reflective and able to mobilize children's curiosity, exploration, questioning and problem solving than to train someone simply to provide good custodial care.

A key Canadian human resources issue is that of recruiting and retaining staff trained in ECE. Two Canadian studies have identified predictors and contributors to this cross-Canada problem, described below in Table 3. In addition, nearly three-quarters, 72.6%, of the respondents in the *You Bet I Care* study indicated that they believe they would need to leave the child care field in order to earn more money and/or achieve a higher status (Doherty et al., 2000)

Table 3: Contributors to recruitment and retention problems in child care

Variable	Predictor (Doherty and Forer, 2005)	Contributor (Beach et al, 2004)
Low Wages	X	X
Poor Benefits	X	X
A perception that the occupation is not respected by the general public or by other professionals	X	X
Indicators of burnout, e.g. feels emotionally drained at the end of the day; no longer gets a feeling of accomplishment from the job	X	
Dissatisfaction with promotion opportunities	X	
Low level of satisfaction with co-workers, e.g. doesn't feel they are supportive	X	
Working conditions in general, e.g. long hours		X
Lack of access to training or professional development, e.g. cannot get release time		X

Sources: Doherty and Forer, 2005; Beach, Bertrand, Forer, Michal, and Tougas, 2004

The provision of adequate wages is linked to the provincial/territorial policy domain (and, less directly, to federal policy and financing). The levels of fee subsidies – the main form of public funding for child care – are set by provincial/

territorial governments and currently tend to be low or in short supply (Beach and Friendly, 2005b). Generally, centres find it difficult to charge fee-paying parents (or subsidized parents if they are surcharged as they are in many provinces) high enough fees to compensate for lack of adequate government funding and thus be able to pay wages commensurate with the level of knowledge and skill required to provide high-quality programs and indeed, *You Bet I Care!* found that wages are higher in jurisdictions that provide operating funding to centres (Doherty et al., 2000). Other characteristics of centres such as the quality of the organizational climate, dedicated space for staff, and burnout that are linked to recruitment and retention problems are also associated with public policy.

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. 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. 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.

Element 7. The physical environment: The program setting

- 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

Characteristics 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 the natural environment, and in 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. The physical environment is also important from a parent and community perspective. What kind of face does a child care centre present? Is it run-down? Institutional? In the basement of an apartment block? Finally, in addition to the effects on these indirect beneficiaries of ELCC programs there are – as some commentators have pointed out– the children, the least powerful stakeholders. It is important to find ways to involve them in considering and reviewing ELCC's physical environments.

In its Country Note, the OECD (2004) noted that Canadian ELCC facilities were generally poor even when they were newly built, that resources and materials did not provide children with high quality environments and that programs tended to emphasize safety at the expense of opportunities for children to develop independence and autonomy. They expressed particular concern about the lack of availability of adequate outdoor space so that children spent little time outdoors and had few opportunities to move freely between indoor and outdoor, contrasting this situation with that in other northern "cold" countries such as Sweden and Finland where children spend considerable time outdoors in the winter while attending regular ELCC programs and special "forest kindergartens" (Farstad, 2005).

Supporting good physical environments for ELCC means not only high standards or regulations regarding 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[20]. There is a growing body of literature on ELCC physical environments. For example, Olds (2001) notes that the design of the centre can have an impact on child/staff interaction. She identifies four basic needs of children that should be considered in every aspect of a centre's design; environments should a) encourage movement; b) support comfort; c) foster competence; and d) encourage a sense of control. Other research shows that the physical environment has an effect on children's behaviour, personal development and cognitive and social activities (van Liempd, 2005; Proshansky and Fabian, 1987; Moore, 1986).

There are many other aspects of the physical environment that are important for children, parents, staff and the community. These include the location of the building, the type and arrangement of furnishings and equipment, availability of natural light and views to the outdoors, health and safety, the amount, access to and layout of outdoor play space, its proximity and connections to the indoor space, colours, textures and surfaces (Moss, 2005). In addition to these considerations, today there is considerable interest in the effects of design and architecture on creativity, physical activity and cultural interests.

Element 8. Data, research and evaluation: Collection and analysis of information for evaluating effective practice and ensuring accountability

- A strategy for collecting and analyzing basic data to monitor effects of policy and financing, ensure accountability and provide a basis for research and evaluation

- Research agenda to address key policy and program issues

- Evaluation of various approaches and innovations

- Regular review of progress towards goals

In *Starting Strong,* the OECD's report on the findings from its first 12 Thematic Reviews of services for young children, two of the eight "policy lessons" derived from the research are pertinent to this element. The OECD's policy study found that both "systematic attention to monitoring and data collection" and "a stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation as part of a continuous improvement process" were key contributors to countries' provision of equitable access to high quality ELCC (OECD, 2001: 11).

However, as a 2003 report by Cleveland, Colley, Friendly and Lero points out, 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. Indeed, the authors suggested that there were no reliable comparable and regularly collected data about Canadian ELCC[21]. At the same time, many Canadian research initiatives arise from the interests of individual researchers and are not part of a planned agenda to explore specific issues or questions directly related to ELCC policy development or program evaluation. As a result, when developing policies, provincial/territorial governments must rely on single studies done in Canada or research conducted in other countries.

The basic data that should be gathered to support planning, program development and resource allocation include, for example, need and demand; demographic characteristics of families; characteristics of programs and facilities; actual usage; availability of spaces by age; attendance patterns of age groups; availability of spaces by geographic area; nature of facilities; provision for children with special needs; levels of training of staff; staff turnover levels; fees in comparison to average family incomes; assessments of quality.

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[20] For a review of Canadian regulations of the physical environment of ELCC programs, see Beach and Friendly, 2005a.

[21] It should be noted that commitment to develop data and monitoring is part of the 2005 bilateral agreements between Ottawa and the provinces on early learning and child care (see footnote 2).

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 ongoing 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.

Finally, a well-defined long term multidisciplinary research agenda and a program of research including evaluation 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. A strong applied research and program evaluation framework and explicit planned research agenda would assist policy makers to undertake analyses and address questions such as, for example, the effect of a provincial initiative on child care quality and whether children with special needs are being served in child care programs in the same proportion as their demographic proportion in the jurisdiction.

The OECD (2004) made three recommendations pertinent to the issue of research and program evaluation at the provincial/territorial level in its review of ELCC in Canada: (1) initiate a regular policy review and research cycle through an annual or biennial process that brings together government officials, researchers and other key stakeholders. This would enable mobilization of the research community around specific issues of concern; (2) encourage independent evaluations of large programs such as province-wide initiatives; and (3) promote the publication of an annual review of policy and data on ELCC in each province, including a summary of provincial research in the prior year.

In summary

The *Quality by design* project aims to encourage debate about quality in ELCC in Canada, to broaden knowledge about best practices in policy, to encourage and support quality and to stimulate further thinking about the best ways to simultaneously care for young children and support their families. This paper has reviewed literature on ideas, research, policy and practice about quality in ELCC; it is as much about what we think as what we know.

We have made the point that quality in ELCC is neither a unitary nor a static concept – that there are different conceptions of quality that are connected to different ideas about children, parents and society. Further, quality is not a static issue and needs to be revisited regularly. At the same time, the process of debating, defining and identifying quality in ELCC and involving the relevant stakeholders is perhaps as important as the outcome of the process.

The paper has identified and discussed eight "elements" of a quality ELCC system: Ideas, Governance, Infrastructure, Planning and Policy Development; Financing; Human Resources; Physical Environment and Data, Research and Evaluation. These elements provide a framework for considering ELCC quality at a system level. These operate as a whole: that is, there is no "magic bullet" for ensuring quality.

Finally, the literature reviewed supports the overarching conclusion of the *Quality by design* project - that a high quality early learning and child care *system* is key to ensuring that high quality programs become the rule rather than the exception in Canada.

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