



**Early Learning and Child Care
in Saskatchewan:
Past, Present and Future**

by Martha Friendly

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Everybody now understands.....that early learning and child care fused together is the kind of objective which any civilized society strives for...that it becomes an indispensable and vital dimension of a child's life, enhancing all of the family characteristics which shore up the child but profoundly influencing in the most positive imaginable way the opportunities for the child...

Stephen Lewis, speaking at *Childcare for a Change!*, a national policy conference, Winnipeg, 2004

Great Expectations

The past year has been a time of great expectations for Canadian child care advocates and for parents of young children. Preceded by two decades of political promises to improve child care, in 2004 Paul Martin's Liberals promised that if elected they would put a national early learning and child care (ELCC) system in place. This program – called “Foundations” – was to be built in collaboration with the provinces/territories over time. The election platform said that it would be based upon four principles – Quality, Universality, Accessibility and Developmental (programming) or “QUAD” (Liberal Party of Canada, 2004:29). After the election, early learning and child care remained a high priority¹.

In the spring of 2005, the minority federal government began to sign bilateral agreements with provinces to begin to put the ELCC program in place, and the March 2005 federal budget committed to \$5 billion over five years. On 29 April 2005 Saskatchewan was one of the first provinces to sign an agreement (Government of Canada and Government of Saskatchewan, 2005). Under this agreement-in-principle, Saskatchewan will get \$29 million in 2005-2006. Like the other provinces, subsequent payments will be transferred after submission of a more detailed plan of action. The Saskatchewan plan is scheduled to be submitted by December 2005 and transfer payments, increasing to \$44.6 million in 2009-2010, will follow.

¹ It should be noted that while commitments to improve ELCC have been made before, and some of the same arguments have been used since the 1960s to justify its provision, with the exception of the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child care (2003) no previous commitment has moved beyond the promise stage to implementation.

Using recent data, this paper evaluates the current and future early learning and child care situation in Saskatchewan using the key policy issues of access, quality and financing to place Saskatchewan's ELCC in the overall Canadian context. It further argues that the idea that ensuring consistently high quality and wide accessibility in ELCC programs requires a carefully designed high quality early learning and child care system. The paper identifies the elements of such a system and then makes suggestions about steps that Saskatchewan should take to begin to meet the "QUAD" principles committed to as the basis for the early learning and child care program.

The International Context

Over the past two decades or so, early learning and child care has experienced what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has called "a surge of policy attention" in industrialized countries. The OECD 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). By now, many of the OECD countries have developed the policy and financing apparatus necessary to ensure widespread access to high quality early learning and child care programs. Today, a number of them have publicly funded programs for three year olds that are virtually fully universal. As a result, two and a half or three year olds in Barcelona, Bologna and Bordeaux² almost all attend publicly funded, high quality, play-based early childhood programs for much of the day whether their mothers are employed or not.

The situation is not the same in Canada. Canada has been one of the dawdlers among this group of nations that includes not only the Nordic countries, with their robust social welfare

² It should be noted that in Western Europe, ELCC programs are not merely an urban phenomenon; many villages and remote communities also provide excellent early childhood programs that are accessible to all children beginning at age three or earlier.

systems, but most of the other western European nations as well. Few Canadian three, four or even five year olds have the early childhood opportunities available to children in countries with better developed public policies. Although 75 per cent of Canadian mothers with a youngest child 3-5 years old are in the paid labour force, child care programs to support this are available for less than 15 per cent (estimated) of Canadian preschool-age children (Friendly and Beach, 2005).

Part of the current context for ELCC has been the keen international interest generated by its potential to achieve a variety of societal goals such as lifelong learning, women's equality, social integration, amelioration of poverty and economic prosperity. The work on ELCC by the OECD's Education and Training Division exemplifies this. Its review of Canada was the 17th in a multi-country Thematic Review conducted between 1998 and 2004. While the report covered all of Canada, four provinces (Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) were reviewed more intensively, as they hosted program visits and meetings with government and community ELCC experts. The OECD report showed that Canada has fallen far behind international developments in early childhood education and observed that Canadian policy approaches to ELCC at both national and provincial levels are incoherent and ineffective, that ELCC programs are severely underfinanced, and that neither quality nor access are adequate (OECD, 2004).

The Canadian Context

While we know that ELCC provision for Canada as a whole lags far behind that of many other countries, within Canada, provincial/territorial development and provision of ELCC programs is so unevenly developed that the term "patchwork" is not merely rhetorical. This is, at least in part, a consequence of Canada's approach to federalism (Friendly, 2001). The conventions of Canadian federalism mean that early learning and child care (like other health,

social and education programs) is defined as the responsibility of provincial/territorial governments. Indeed, in the years between the termination of the Canada Assistance Plan in 1996³ and federal/provincial/territorial agreement on a Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care in 2003, there was no significant federal involvement in early learning and child care.

Experience with Medicare illustrates that provincially-delivered social programs can be bound together by national principles and policy frameworks to create a “national” approach that goes a long way to providing Canadians with some basic assurances of equivalent access. While there are some similarities between Medicare and the emerging ELCC program, such as overarching general principles and federal financing, the environment of federalism that became entrenched in the 1990s⁴ has not lent itself to the strong federal leadership that created the Canada Health Act. Thus, the process of putting the “national” ELCC program in place is based very much on negotiation between Ottawa and the provinces. The commitments are shared and agreed to at a common table; there is a “shared vision” and shared principles; provincial reporting is to each province’s respective “public” rather than to the federal government; and there is a shared federal/provincial/territorial work on knowledge, information and effective practices such as evaluation, a National Quality Framework and a strategy for data. The main condition set out by the federal government is that the federal funds be spent in *regulated*⁵ early learning and child care programs for children under age six that are not part of the formal school

³ The Canada Assistance Plan, Canada’s national welfare program, was introduced in 1966 and terminated in 1996. Its welfare-oriented child care provisions which provided 50-50 cost-sharing to provinces laid the groundwork for today’s child care provision with its reliance on a fee subsidy system.

⁴ During the 1990s, Canada’s approach to social programs became more decentralized as federal transfer payments were reduced and specified funding programs were replaced with block funding (the CHST). This culminated in the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) in 1999. SUFA stated that new national social programs would not be initiated without the agreement of a majority of provinces; that is, not by the federal government as Medicare was. For an analysis of the effects of this on ELCC see Friendly, 2001.

⁵ With regard to child care, “regulated” is understood to mean meeting specified provincial/territorial standards with mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement.

system. Within this loose framework, how each province and territory develops its own ELCC program will be critical.

What Does Early Learning and Child Care Mean?

“Early learning and child care”, not “early learning” and “child care”

The term “early learning and child care” or “early childhood education and care” (ECEC) refers to what in Canada are multiple programs – child care (or day care), nursery schools, kindergarten and parts of parenting programs⁶. Over the years, the idea that these should be delivered as one seamless program (“early learning and child care”) has gained considerable currency in Canada (Colley, 2005, OISE-UT, 2005). Generally, ELCC programs are more seamless in many other countries than they are in Canada, where kindergarten for five year olds is usually part day and where the main ECEC programs – kindergarten, preschool or nursery school, and child care are usually distinctly separated, not integrated (that is, “early learning” and “child care”).

There is also strong support for the idea that ELCC programs should be accessible to all children whether they are from low or middle income families, typically developing or not, whether or not the mother is in the workforce, and whether they live in downtown Toronto, rural Saskatchewan, or a northern Métis community – that is, they should be universal. Public opinion polls show a high level of public support for this idea (Environics, 1998; Elliot, 2001; Child Care Advocacy Association/Child Care Federation, 2003).

Finally, a pertinent question is “What is ‘early learning’”? Does this mean that elementary schooling should be pushed down several years to produce “early literacy” or “school

⁶ While all these programs are considered to be part of ELCC, in this paper, most of the data refer to regulated child care; data on other ELCC programs are even less available than data on child care.

readiness”)? While the idea of early learning in current popular culture often connotes these rather narrow goals, the early childhood education field generally conceives of school success as only one among multiple goals⁷. Indeed, there is considerable discussion in the early childhood literature about how ideas about the nature of the child intersect with the goals of early childhood education programs – that is whether the child is an active learner and a citizen in his own right or an “adult in training” (Cohen, Moss, Petrie and Wallance, 2004).

One characteristic that has distinguished Canada from countries with better developed ELCC systems is the absence of a clearly articulated ELCC vision or goals at either the federal or provincial/territorial levels. Over the past few decades, Canadian rationales for ELCC have swung back and forth among life-long learning, school readiness and child development to employability, women's equality, balancing work and family, reducing poverty, alleviating at-risk status and social integration. These multiple rationales fall into four broad policy goals: child development/lifelong learning, parents’ employment, social integration, and equity⁸. However, the prominence of these rationales and goals have tended to be serial and, like the rest of the ELCC landscape, fragmented.

Neither nationally nor provincially has there been the kind 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” recommended by the European Commission Childcare Network (2004:12). The OECD experts also commented on this in their review of Canada: “We propose recommendations to stimulate discussion among governments, policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders...This we believe is a first task,

⁷ A good example of this can be found in a position paper by the British Columbia Early Childhood Education Provincial Articulation Committee: “In the early childhood education sector, the word readiness is troublesome and has been actively avoided in a philosophy of care with a developmental focus.

that precludes discrimination between ‘ready’ and ‘not ready’ (Coalition of Child Care Advocates of British Columbia, 2005).

⁸ See the Childcare Resource and Research Unit website at www.childcarecanada.org for a fuller description of these four ELCC goals.

both at the federal and the 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).

ELCC in Saskatchewan: Demographic Context

The demographic context is a key backdrop to understanding and assessing ELCC. Demographics such as child population, mothers’ labour force participation, child poverty, and diversity all not only play a role in determining the need and demand for services but are useful for assessing the adequacy and appropriateness of policies and programs. The following section provides relevant Saskatchewan demographic data and corresponding national data to set the context⁹.

Child Population

In Canada, the number of preschool age children has been dropping for some years. Nationally, the 0-5 population decreased 9 per cent between 1992 and 2003; in Saskatchewan, it decreased by 19 per cent in the same period. Birth rates across Canada ranged from 9.2 to 12.4 per 1000; in Saskatchewan, the birth rate was 11.8 per 1000. In Saskatchewan in 2003, there were a total of 34,100 children aged 0-2 years; 35,100 aged 3-5 years; and, 91,100 aged 6-12 years.

Mothers’ Labour Force Participation

Over the past two decades, the labour force participation rate of mothers of young children has increased year after year. Nationally, it increased for mothers with children in all age groups between 1992 and 2003 – up 8 per cent with a youngest child 0-2; up 7 per cent with a youngest child 3-5; and up 6 per cent with a youngest child aged 6-15. Saskatchewan has one of the higher provincial labour force participation rates for mothers with young children. As Table 1 shows, in 2003, it exceeded the national average in two of the three age categories.

⁹ The source for the data in this section is Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2005 and Friendly and Beach, 2005.

Table 1	Youngest child 0-2 years (%)	Youngest child 3-5 years (%)	Youngest child 6-15 years (%)
National	69	75	82
Saskatchewan	67	77	86

In 2003, 20,600 children aged 0-2 years, 22,200 children aged 3-5 years, and 63,600 children 6-15 years in Saskatchewan had mothers in the paid labour force. Compared to other countries, Canada has a high labour force participation rate for mothers with young children. For example, in France the labour force participation for mothers with at least one child less than three years was 55 per cent in 2001; in Australia it was 47 per cent for mothers with at least one child under three years in 2000.

Children Identifying with an Aboriginal Group

A key demographic feature of Saskatchewan is its large Aboriginal population. National data show that the proportion of the child population in Saskatchewan with an Aboriginal identity is larger than it is in Canada as a whole (about 25 per cent of Saskatchewan 0-4 year olds were identified with an Aboriginal group compared to about 5 per cent of 0-4 year olds for Canada as a whole). In 2001, there were 16,785 Saskatchewan children aged 0-4 years and 17,885 children aged 5-9 years identifying with an Aboriginal group.

Child Poverty

A commonly used measure of child poverty is the proportion of children living below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). Although there are criticisms of the LICO, it is used here as it is the most commonly used Canadian poverty measure. From this perspective, the national child poverty average is about 15 per cent, with considerable variation among provinces. Recent immigrants and Aboriginal families are overrepresented in poverty figures. As Table 2

shows, Saskatchewan’s child poverty rate is quite high; for children aged 3-5 years, it is the highest among the provinces.

Table 2	Percent of children aged 0-2 years below the LICO	Percent of children aged 3-5 years below the LICO
Other provinces	(range) 11.6 - 28.3	(range)11.2 - 26.8
Saskatchewan	21.5 (7,100 children)	26.8 (9,200 children)

The Present: Taking Stock of Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan

An Overview of Programs, Access, Financing and Quality

The following section provides an overview of the current ELCC situation in Saskatchewan to the extent that data are available¹⁰. It should be noted that one concern about the overall ELCC situation in Canada is the absence of comparable, consistent, and regularly collected data, particularly data that shed light on quality issues. The issue of data is addressed in the federal/provincial/territorial agreements, with commitments to common indicators in specified areas, and funds were set aside in the 2005 budget for a data strategy.

What Programs are Available Nationally and in Saskatchewan?

	Nationally	Saskatchewan
Kindergarten	<p>Five year olds – All p/ts provide at least universal part-day (several have universal full-day every day)</p> <p>Four year olds – Only Ontario has universal, usually part-day. Several p/ts provide limited targeted programs.</p> <p>Usually an entitlement</p>	<p>Five year olds – Universal part day</p> <p>Four and three year olds – Pre-K program, targeted to at-risk children. An estimated 1,500 three and four year olds were enrolled in pre-K in 2003/04.</p> <p>Not an entitlement – at school board discretion</p>

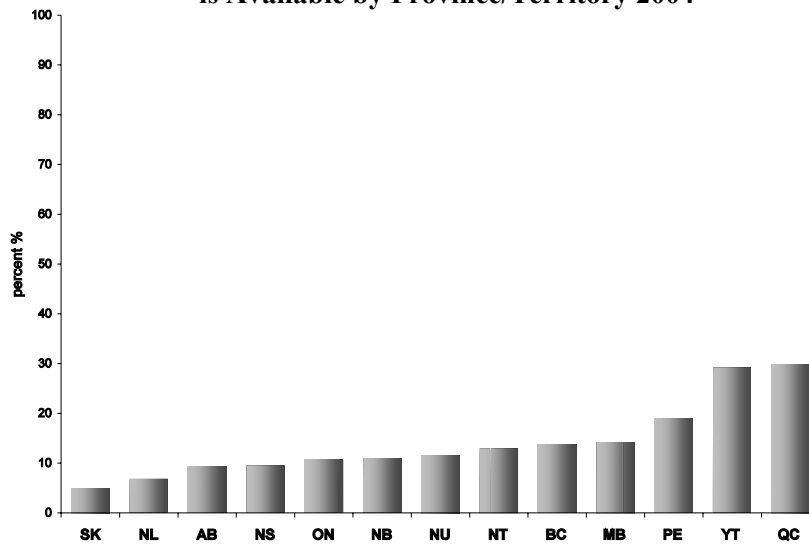
¹⁰ The sources for the data in this section are Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2005; Friendly and Beach, 2005.

<p>Child care</p> <hr/>	<p>All p/ts regulate and provide some funding for centres, family day care, school-age, primarily in the form of fee subsidies for low income families.</p> <p>All p/ts permit for-profit, most provide some funding for for-profits</p> <p>Majority regulate and fund on-reserve child care</p> <p>Never an entitlement</p> <hr/>	<p>Child care centres, family day care, school-age day care regulated and some funding – primarily fee subsidies – provided.</p> <p>For-profit permitted, no funding. (Currently there are no for-profits operating)</p> <p>On-reserve child care is neither regulated nor funded by the province but is under the aegis of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.</p> <p>Not an entitlement</p> <hr/>
<p>Preschool/nursery school</p> <hr/>	<p>Most p/ts regulate part-day preschools/nursery schools under child care legislation</p> <hr/>	<p>Part-day preschools not regulated</p> <hr/>
<p>Other - Aboriginal Head Start (on and off reserve)</p>	<p>Available through Health Canada, include part-day early childhood education programs (which may or may not be regulated) as well as other elements for Aboriginal children and families</p>	<p>Both on and off reserve Aboriginal Head Start programs may be provided</p>

Access (Percent of children 0-12 for whom a regulated space is available - Coverage)

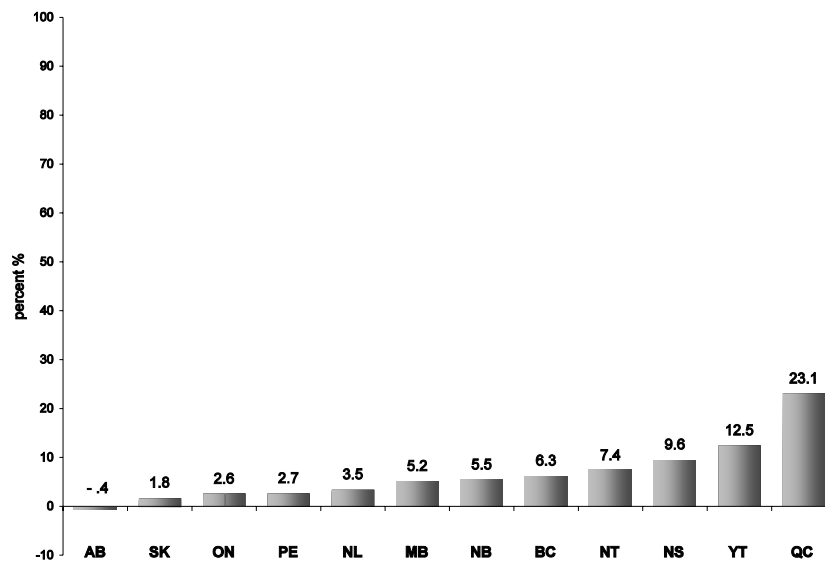
Nationally, there are enough regulated child care spaces for 15.5 per cent of the child population aged 0-12. There is a considerable range, however, among the provinces/territories. As Figure 1 shows, Saskatchewan’s coverage is the lowest, at 4.9 per cent of the child population 0-12 (the next lowest in Newfoundland with 6.8 per cent). The highest coverage is in Quebec, where there are enough spaces to cover 29.9 per cent of children aged 0-12.

Figure 1. Percent of Children Aged 0-12 for Whom a Regulated Child Care Space is Available by Province/Territory 2004



Overall, coverage increased nationally by 8 per cent in the period 1992-2004. This, however, is distorted by Quebec, where coverage increased much more rapidly than the average.¹¹ As Figure 2 shows, Saskatchewan’s increase in coverage – 1.8 per cent in the twelve years – was the lowest increase after Alberta’s, where coverage decreased.

Figure 2. Percentage Increase/Decrease in Coverage (Percent of Children for whom a Regulated Child Care Space was Available by Province/Territory 1992-2004)



¹¹ Quebec began to develop a universal ELCC program in 1998. As the program included very significant expansion of spaces and financing and initiatives to improve quality, Quebec data now skews the cross-Canada averages.

Across Canada as a whole, there were 373,678 more regulated spaces in 2004 than in 1992. However, Quebec's massive increase in spaces distorts this figure. Outside Quebec, the overall increase in the number of spaces was 130,337 in that period. In Saskatchewan, there was an increase of 1,492 regulated spaces over the 12-year period from 1992-2004.

Financing

Total Budget Allocations for Regulated Child Care (unadjusted) 1992-2004

In 2004, total provincial/territorial spending for regulated child care was \$2.4 billion, but of this total, Quebec's spending represents 65 per cent. Outside Quebec, total provincial/territorial spending on regulated child care was \$842 million. There was considerable variation in the amount of increase between 1992 and 2004 among provinces/territories; the range (excluding Quebec) was from a more than five-fold (500 per cent) increase (in Newfoundland) to -20 per cent (a decrease, in Alberta).

Saskatchewan spent \$12.3 million on regulated child care in 1992; this increased to \$19.6 million in 2004, an increase of about 60 per cent. As a point of contrast, Manitoba, with a relatively similar child population, demographics, and prairie traditions, spent \$73 million in 2004, up 73 per cent from \$42.2 in 1992.

Allocation for Each Child 0-12 years 2004 ¹²

Nationally, the range of public dollars spent on regulated child care for each child 0-12 is from \$104 to \$1,448 in 2004 (the highest, Quebec, distorts the average somewhat). Saskatchewan spends \$123, the lowest after Alberta.

¹² This was calculated by dividing the total provincial budget for regulated child care by the number of children aged 0-12 years.

Quality

Allocation for Each Regulated Space 2004¹³

Nationally, the average spending per regulated child care space was \$3,223 in 2004. The range, however, is substantial, with Quebec's spending again distorting the cross-Canada average; the range is \$816 per regulated space (in Alberta) to \$4,849 in Quebec. Seven provinces/territories spent less than \$2,000 per regulated space.

While six provinces/territories spent less per regulated space in 2004 than they did in 2001, Saskatchewan was not among them. Saskatchewan's spending of \$2,483 was an increase of \$565 (in unadjusted dollars) from \$1,918 in 1992.

Auspice

Nationally, in 2004, 80 per cent of all regulated child care was operated on a not-for-profit basis¹⁴, an increase from about 70 per cent of the total in 1992. There is considerable variation among provinces/territories on this variable, with a majority of child care provided by for-profit operators in some and funding for for-profit provision not available in others. While Saskatchewan's legislation permits for-profit operation of regulated child care, funding for it is not available. In practice, there was no for-profit child care in Saskatchewan in 2004.

Human Resources

The importance for quality of staff training in early childhood education as well as other human resource issues such as wages and working conditions has been well documented in research (for example, see Whitebook, 2003). No Canadian jurisdiction requires all child care

¹³ These figures were calculated by dividing the total provincial budget for regulated child care by the number of regulated child care spaces.

¹⁴ Here "not-for-profit" includes both private non-profit (community-based, co-op or voluntary organization) or publicly operated. Publicly operated child care is found only in Ontario, where about 10 per cent of spaces are operated by municipal governments, Quebec, where school-age child care is operated by school authorities and two centres in Alberta (Jasper and Beaumont). Research shows that not-for-profit child care is more likely to provide good quality than for-profit child care (Prentice, in preparation).

staff to have a post-secondary credential and none requires university-level training. The length of training in early childhood education required for (some) staff in regulated child care ranges from none to a community college diploma or certificate of one to three years.

Saskatchewan recently increased its ECE training requirements so that by January 2005, 30 per cent of all staff in a centre had to have a one year certificate in child care or equivalent; by January 2007, a two year diploma or equivalent will be required for an additional 20 per cent of staff.

Discussion

As the first sections of this paper pointed out, comparative policy research such as the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care has documented how Canada as a whole has poorly developed ELCC. Further, as the interprovincial comparison shows, Saskatchewan's ELCC situation is one of the more poorly developed within Canada from the perspectives of quality, financing and access. The demographic data show that Saskatchewan has a high rate of women who are mothers of young children in the paid labour force, a high child poverty rate, and a larger than average child Aboriginal population.

Saskatchewan, like other provinces, offers public kindergarten to provide early childhood education for five year olds but as that program is part-day, it is unlikely to meet the needs of many working parents. As well, the enrollment of the pre-K program specifically targeted to "at risk" three and four year olds – an estimated 1,500 children – is considerably below the 9,200 3-5 year olds living in families with incomes below the LICO. Neither do the pre-K programs operate for a long enough day to provide child care arrangements for mothers in the paid labour force, in job training, or in school.

It is in the area of regulated child care where Saskatchewan's provision is particularly underdeveloped. At 4.9 per cent coverage, Saskatchewan's regulated child care coverage is the lowest in Canada. The increase in supply in the last decade or so (1992-2004) has been very slow – an average increase of only 124 spaces a year or a total increase of less than 1,500 regulated spaces in a twelve year period. With regard to overall financing for child care, Saskatchewan is one of the low spenders in Canada, spending only \$123 per child aged 0-12. It should be noted that the available supply of regulated child care in most provinces includes a complement of part-day preschool or nursery school spaces. While regulation is considered to be a prerequisite for good quality ELCC programs, Saskatchewan does not regulate these (Friendly and Beach, 2005).

Access to early learning and child care means that not only must a space be available but the parent must have the financial means to have access to it. In all jurisdictions except Quebec, a system of fee subsidies for eligible low income families is intended to allow financial access to regulated child care. In Saskatchewan, 3,716 children 0-12 years were subsidized in March 2004 (3,662 in December 1992; 3,683 in March 1995; 3,634 in 1998; 3,684 in 2001). Two elements of the fee subsidy system, in particular, have an impact on access – the income eligibility level and whether there is a surcharge. In Saskatchewan, a family earning up to \$21,000 gross income (one or two parents and two children) can be “fully subsidized”. But after being granted the full subsidy, the family will be surcharged a *minimum* of 10 per cent of the fee.¹⁵

Average spending per regulated space is related to quality; that is, low or inadequate financing makes it difficult for a child care program to deliver a high quality program. Between 2001-2004, six provinces experienced a drop in spending per regulated space; Saskatchewan was not among them. However, public spending per regulated space in Saskatchewan is still quite low at \$2,483 per space (calculated). This includes operational funding equivalent to \$775 per

¹⁵ According to provincial officials, the average surcharge to a subsidized family is 30-40 per cent above the fee.

staff in centres as well as a maximum monthly subsidy paid to a centre to care for a preschool-age child of \$255 a month; the subsidy is \$355 per infant (Friendly and Beach, 2005).

Finally, with regard to ELCC staff, the heart of a high quality early childhood program, Saskatchewan was one of the few provinces to increase its early childhood training requirements for child care centres in the last few years. Nevertheless, they are still quite low, even among Canadian jurisdictions, which all have relatively low ECE training requirements¹⁶.

How these characteristics affect the quality of Saskatchewan's regulated child care programs is unknown as Canadian data on the quality of early learning and child care are not regularly collected. In the only Canada-wide study of quality, which included observational data¹⁷ (collected in seven provinces/territories including Saskatchewan), at one point in time, 1998, Saskatchewan's mean ratings on widely-used quality assessment tools were 4.1 (ECERS-R), 4.2 (ITERS) and 4.5 (FIDCRS) (Goelman, Doherty, Lero, Lagrange and Tougas, 2000). It should be noted that quality in the pre-K programs appears to be higher; in a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of Saskatchewan's pre-K programs, the ECERS-R (designed to be used in child care centres) was used in 10 Regina pre-Ks. In a first observation, the total mean score was 5.94; it rose to 6.21 in a second observation (Krentz, McNaughton and Warkentin, 2002). (In these scales, a score of 3 is considered "minimal", 5 "good" and 7 is the highest possible score; 1 is the lowest.)

It has been observed that a general weakness of Canadian child care is that its development has followed a market model (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, 2004). That is, there is little or no public responsibility for overall service planning or for developing or maintaining services. To some extent, maintenance of this market approach has been justified by

¹⁶ Post-secondary early childhood education training is a key predictor of quality in child care centres.

¹⁷ The study, *You Bet I Care!* Used several widely used instruments to collect ratings of observed quality, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R), the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS), the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FIDCRS) and the Caregiver Interaction Scale. Data were collected in 1998.

the idea of parental choice; that is, by the idea that as some parents prefer to use unregulated ELCC arrangements - perhaps provided by relatives or friends - or not to use any form of ELCC outside the nuclear family, it is inappropriate for government to support the development of an ELCC system.

Saskatchewan has used a market approach in which there was little support for development of ELCC throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. As there was neither a proactive approach to expanding supply nor support such as capital funding or infrastructure for non-profit community groups, non-profit expansion has been very slow. In other provinces with little institutional support for developing child care (such as Alberta or Atlantic Canada), for-profit operators moved into the vacuum. As research shows, for-profit provision is less likely to deliver high quality ELCC (although it is obviously not the sole factor) (Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2005). In Saskatchewan, full-day for-profit programs were not licensed until the 1990s and financing has never been available for them. This approach – while it has contributed to Saskatchewan’s current low level of coverage – has had the distinct advantage that the entrepreneurial sector that operates a substantial part of child care supply in some jurisdictions did not develop (Prentice, in preparation).

Overall, Saskatchewan’s ELCC cannot be called a “system”. The “early learning” part – pre-kindergarten and kindergarten – is part of the public school system. The “child care” part consists of a collection of small, poorly supported community-based programs – often in poor facilities – that struggle while public policy fails to support them adequately enough to ensure that the quality is high enough to make them “early learning” programs.

Origins

In a historical analysis of child care in Saskatchewan, Judith Martin makes the point that in the 1970s, while Saskatchewan's NDP government was pursuing social democratic policies such as public ownership, occupational health and safety, and Medicare, child care was a "hard sell". She attributes this to the "fixed notion about which mothers merited state support to work outside the home" (Martin, 2001:175). Martin quotes a key NDP cabinet minister's address to the legislature: "the lowest priority is where the parent has adequate income...but merely wants someone else to look after the children. In all possible cases, people who have children should raise them too". Another NDP member – who was then appointed minister responsible for child care – stated to the legislature: "the mother's place is in the home" (Martin, 2001: 175).

The language of the 2005 agreement between Saskatchewan and the federal government is quite different from that of the 1970s cited by Martin. It identifies the benefits to children of high quality ELCC, provision of "stimulating enriching experiences and healthy physical environments" and the value of "qualified and dedicated early childhood educators". It identifies objectives including "measurable and demonstrable improvements in quality" and "better access to early learning and child care". Finally, it, like the other federal/provincial agreements, agrees to develop and release a five year Action Plan, including specific priorities for spending, measurable targets for monitoring progress, and identification of how Saskatchewan will address the ELCC needs of Aboriginal communities and others in "special circumstances".

As the OECD experts commented in their review, "Saskatchewan is starting from a very low base of child care – reaching only 5.4 per cent of the population [0-6]" (OECD, 2004:51)". Based on the data presented here, the OECD international team's comments about the quality of Canadian child care services overall would seem to apply to Saskatchewan:

Some individual services, such as those portrayed in our examples, have set themselves more ambitious aims and objectives, but from our limited experience, they seem to be atypical. In many centres, ideas about safety dominated the activities and environment. Some of the accommodation, even in newly built centres, was very poor, although it met the required health and safety standards. Rooms were barren places, often poorly lit, with relatively few resources to interest young children and little evidence of children's own work (OECD, 2004:138).

There is no “Magic Bullet”

An important lesson learned from research in the past decade has to do with “early learning”. There is considerable research that shows that it is the *quality* of ELCC programs that determines how developmentally beneficial they are; that is, whether they provide “early learning” (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). While children from low income families may derive more benefit, research consistently documents that there are social and cognitive advantages for children of all income groups from high quality ELCC programs (Vandell, 2004). For the majority of Canadian children whose mothers are in the paid labour force, however, unregulated arrangements (unregulated family child care¹⁸, a relative, a babysitter or a nanny) are the norm. While these are of unknown quality, it is generally agreed that they do not provide developmental early childhood education. From this perspective, quality and access are inseparable. That is, even if ELCC programs are of excellent quality, if limited supply or high cost makes them inaccessible, their benefits are available only to the lucky few. While it may be that some families might not choose to use high quality ELCC programs for their children even if they were accessible, without their provision, the choice is not available. Further, the Canadian experience in most regions shows that when such programs are available, families choose to use them.

¹⁸ Family child care is in the private home of an unregulated provider. In Canada, a minority of family child care is regulated by provincial/territorial governments; the remainder is not regulated. Research shows that quality in family child care is improved by regulation and support (Doherty, 2001).

Another important lesson derived from policy research is that if high quality ELCC programs are to be the rule rather than the exception, a high quality *system* is key. The components of such a system operate as a whole; that is, there is no “magic bullet”. Balaguer, a member of the European Commission Childcare Network who was instrumental in developing a pan-European scheme of 40 quality targets for ELCC services, commented that the targets are interdependent: “They form a totality [and] taking any of them in isolation may be meaningless and misleading” (2004: 8). A conception of the essential, interdependent components of a high quality ELCC system in a Canadian context has been developed by the *Quality by Design* project¹⁹. This conception includes the following elements;

- **Ideas, or a conceptual framework** (including ongoing debate and discussion about the ideas; a clear statement of the values that underpin the program; a definition of quality; system-level goals; pedagogy related to the values and goals and a curriculum defined as a short general framework);

- **Infrastructure** (including skillful policy development; regulation defining minimum basic standards; monitoring to ensure standards are met; mechanisms for ongoing quality improvement; ongoing consultation at a program level; ongoing program assessment; public education about ELCC);

- **Governance** (including clear definition of roles and responsibilities of government at different levels, parents and the community; public management at a system level; policy, planning and program delivery organized in one lead department; program delivery managed at the local level; not-for-profit operation; involvement of parents);

¹⁹ The Childcare Resource and Research Unit’s *Quality by Design* project has been working with provincial child care officials and consulting with the ELCC community in several provinces. It is funded by Social Development Partnerships, Social Development Canada.

- **Planning and policy development** (including best available knowledge re: best practices in policy and practice; mandated involvement of experts and stakeholders in policy processes at all levels; critical mass of knowledgeable policy makers; system-wide planning with targets and timetables; local service planning);

- **Financing** (including financing to cover capital costs; sustained financing sufficient to support ongoing program operation; core or base funding that covers the majority of program operation costs; affordable parent fees);

- **Human resources** (including leadership at all levels (program, supervisory, educational, and policy); post-secondary level training in early childhood with lead staff at a degree level; 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** (including sufficient well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces; first-rate equipment and program resources; amenities (staff room, outside play space, kitchen, windows for natural light); connections to the surrounding community); and,

- **Data, research and evaluation** (including collection and analysis of data to monitor effects of policy and financing; a research agenda to address key policy and program issues; evaluation of various approaches and innovation).

To the Future

One of the first commitments of the April federal-Saskatchewan agreement is to design a provincial Action Plan for beginning to meet the “QUAD” principles. A key OECD recommendation seems a good starting point for this:

We encourage...all provinces...To develop a provincial plan for early childhood services development...with clearly spelt out goals, targets, timelines, responsibilities and accountability measures... While universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets and specific funding for disadvantaged children, Aboriginal children and children with special needs. The plan should aim to bring provincial regulations and pedagogical regimes into line with current knowledge. Criteria for centre performance such as minimum benchmarks, outcome measures, training levels and the like should also be included so that parents can be assured that services are properly resourced and monitored (OECD, 2004: 70).

As was pointed out earlier, one characteristic that has distinguished Canada from countries with better developed ELCC systems is the absence of a clearly articulated ELCC vision or goals at either federal or provincial/territorial levels. A necessary first step to a meaningful Saskatchewan Action Plan will be to flesh out the first component of the early learning and child care system outlined in a previous section – the ideas. This should include open discussion with an objective of a clear statement of the values that underpin the program as well as system-level goals, considering such questions as: What is the purpose of the program? Who is it for? How do we see children? What is the vision? From these ideas, a conception of pedagogy, an approach to curriculum (defined as a short general framework) and a plan for the system’s human resources can flow.

The quality of child care programs in Saskatchewan is perhaps the paramount issue. Building quality is a complex, evolving process that must begin with the ideas that underpin the program; it requires a systematic approach. The emphasis of both the OECD and the European Commission Childcare Network on the importance of a “democratic and participatory approach”

to defining and improving quality is noteworthy. While variety and flexibility have to date been a feature of Canadian early childhood education, improving quality would be well supported if the important ideas and questions were openly debated with the objective of achieving agreement on the ideas necessary to underpin program development. As Balaguer has described this in the context of the European Union's work on quality, "defining quality is a process, important in its own right...and the process should be democratic and continuous" (2004: 8). Overall, however, responsibility for improving quality must be led by the provincial governments whose public policy defines and supports the system.

Among the challenges for all provinces is moving from "early learning" and "child care" to "early learning and child care". As the OECD said: "the aim is to conceptualize and deliver care and education as one seamless service to young children. In the view of the OECD review team, greater integration of kindergarten and child care would bring real advantages in the Canadian context" (OECD, 2004: 71). This would be particularly so in Saskatchewan, with its low level of child care provision, quality challenges, and targeted approach. A variety of models for integrating kindergarten and child care can be found in other countries and in Canada; several provinces provide full-day kindergarten for five year olds and the integration of kindergarten and child care is being evaluated by the City of Toronto's First Duty project (Toronto First Duty research team, 2004). Studying and adapting elements of these models to create an integrated approach would be valuable in Saskatchewan.

To begin to move towards meeting the "QUAD" principles of universality and access, Saskatchewan will have to tackle a low level of accessibility. Expansion of child care has been very slow, the supply of programs is very limited (indeed, in some areas, they are not available at all), and affordability is an issue even for subsidized parents. System-wide planning with "goals,

targets, timetables, responsibilities and accountability measures”, as well as local service planning, is key to improving accessibility. This would mean that the government would need to begin to assume some responsibility for developing and maintaining programs, as well as ensuring financial accessibility. In addition, capital financing would support not only improved accessibility but improved quality of provision.

Transformation of the way Saskatchewan child care is financed would contribute to quality as well as accessibility. The OECD recommended a “substantial increase in public funding”. The “low public expenditure rates per child”, “market-determined fee structures”, “inefficient subsidy systems with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria” and “general under funding in the child care sector” (OECD, 2004: 76) that they singled out are certainly part of Saskatchewan’s situation. The OECD’s recommendation is pertinent:

A change in grant funding may also be envisaged, with a move away from personal subsidy mechanisms toward operational funding and an entitlement for children, as in the traditional educational model. Earmarked operational funding seems to be a surer means of ensuring more highly qualified personnel and enriched learning environments in the centres – both of which are strong indicators of quality and learning” (OECD, 2004:76).

Saskatchewan’s overall level of funding of regulated child care and expansion of that funding has been very low – among the lowest among provinces. The OECD recommended a combined federal/provincial investment approach to moving towards universal provision with incremental budget increases over the next decades, suggesting that federal and provincial governments contribute 40 per cent each and parents 20 per cent. This would mean that new funding should come from the provincial government as well as from the federal government (the new federal transfer in the first year will be \$29 million, whereas provincial spending was only \$19 million in 2004).

When signing the federal/provincial agreement on early learning and child care on 29 April 2005 Saskatchewan Premier Lorne Calvert likened it to Saskatchewan's leadership role in establishing Medicare:

Today's agreement reflects the value that families place on the development of their children, and the importance of gaining better access to early learning and child care services. This agreement also mirrors the establishment of Medicare in Canada. From that small beginning in Saskatchewan, a system has developed that is part of the fabric of Canadian society, and is at the heart of social policy (Social Development Canada, <http://www.sdc.gc.ca/en/cs/comm/sd/news/2005/050429c.shtml>, retrieved August 1, 2005).

Beginning to meet the agreement's commitments to the QUAD principles – quality, universality, affordability and development (programming) – will require “considerable time, commitment, collaboration” (as the agreement states), focused public policy and considerable political will. While it will also take more money and more years than those included in the initial five-year commitment, the principles and the commitments seem a good first step. The essential next steps, however, are to develop the policy and structures necessary to put these in place.

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Martha's recent publications include *Early childhood education and care in Canada 2004* (2005), *Next steps on early childhood education and care*, (Canadian Review of Social Policy, 2005), *Strengthening Canada's social and economic foundations: Next steps for early learning and child care*, (Policy Options, 2004) and a chapter in *Social determinants of health: Canadian perspectives* (D. Raphael, (Ed.) 2004). Recently she was co-author of Canada's Background Report on ECEC for the OECD (2004) and a member of the expert team for the OECD's Review of ECEC in Austria.

She has been actively involved in advocating for progressive social policy for many years and works closely with a variety of community and advocacy groups as well as with government policy makers and other researchers, supporting a universal system of early learning and child care for all children.

Martha was born in New York City and educated in the United States, studying psychology in undergraduate and graduate programs. Before immigrating to Canada in 1971, she worked on one of the first evaluations of the American Head Start program. She has two grown children, both of whom attended community-based child care from an early age.

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