

How can the latest research contribute to early learning and child care policy? What do we know – and what do we think?

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Quality by Design

- Basis: Synthesis of current research re: quality in early learning and child care (Friendly, Doherty and Beach, 2006)
- **Quality by Design** project - Quality at the system-wide policy level rather than at the level of individual programs

ELCC research

- “Child care at the centre”
- Multiple points of view/disciplines apply
- Psychology, sociology, economics, political science/politics, history, social work, health/medicine, accounting, etc.
- Different methodologies

Policy research/analysis

- Eclectic, broad, comparative
- Key focus - analysis of existing/prospective policies with intention of improving social welfare/achieving social goals

Three points

1. Why is quality important ?

QUALITY MATTERS...

2. What is quality?

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES BUT
COMMON KEY CONCEPTS

3. What do we know about how to get quality ?

A QUALITY *SYSTEM*...

1. Why/how is quality important?

Starting point: Two ways to ask the same question:

- Is day care/child care bad for children?
("institutionalized day care")
- Is early childhood education good for children?
("early learning and child care", "early childhood education and care")

The answer – It depends

A more contemporary way to ask the question...

Under what conditions does child care contribute to/undermine children's development (school readiness, emotional well-being, social skills, etc.) ?

- “It depends” has been “the answer” for at least 15 years
- But today much more is known about upon WHAT it depends than 15 years ago

The research consensus today ...

- “There is consensus that the first years of life are particularly important for cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. Parental leave policies are one component **but the primary policy and program is early childhood education and care services**”.
- “The general consensus today is that **preschools are important for children** in order to stimulate development and learning and offer care and education in activities and relationships with a stable group of adults and peers outside the home”.

Research summary...cont.

- “Where two or three to five or six year olds are concerned, there is significant research now that documents that participation in good quality ECEC programs not only does no harm **but has positive impacts on children.** Positive impacts are especially strong, according to some research, on the most disadvantaged”

(Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel and Brookes-Gunn, OECD - Social, Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs)

More research summary

- “...the positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children’s development that has been studied is **one of the most consistent findings in developmental science.** While child care of poor quality is associated with poorer developmental outcomes, high quality child care is associated with outcomes that all parents want to see in their children – ranging from cooperation with adults to the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, to early competence in math and reading”.

Research summary (with apologies)

- “The influence of child care is not as large as the influence of the family environment but **it emerges repeatedly in study after study** using different measures and for children of different ages, living in different circumstances”

(Shonkoff and Phillips, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, US)

2. What is quality in ELCC?

Different perspectives:

- Child
- Parent
- Mother
- Staff or ECEs
- Community
- Etc.

Definition of quality is shaped by:

- Values and history
- Social, economic and political context
- Conception of childhood (“adults-in-training” or “child as citizen”)
- Ideas about purpose of ELCC (parental employment, women’s equality, poverty reduction, child development - school readiness, future citizens, etc.

Quality is a relative concept...

- No “off the shelf” definition or summary of best practices
- While there is (probably) no universal definition of quality, some concepts so critical to children’s well-being that they are widely agreed to be the foundation of definitions of quality

Common concepts about children underlying many quality definitions:

- Children need to feel loved, respected and listened to;
- Children are generally sociable and enjoy the company of other children and adults besides their immediate family;
- With affection, social life and a stimulating environment, most children mature, learn and develop a wide range of skills and competencies in the first five or six years

EU Childcare Network: Common “quality targets” (1990s)

- Model for Canada – collaboration
- 12 countries
- 4 year process - government, academics, practitioners
- 40 targets (e.g.)
 - Infrastructure
 - Access
 - Physical environment
 - Food
 - Public financing (at least 1% of GDP)

Defining quality is a process

- Quality is a relative concept, based on values and beliefs;
 - Process of defining quality is important in its own right;
 - Process should be continuous and democratic
- (Balaguer, 2004)

Asking the right questions...

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

3. Quality ELCC...what do we know? (research)

Individual programs: Quality is more likely if...

- **Teaching staff - postsecondary ECE training (4 years)**
- **Teaching staff - salaries at high end of continuum**
- **Ratio of staff to children is “favourable”**
- **Auspice is not-for-profit**
- **Centre revenue is “higher**
- **Space is free or subsidized**
- **Director - high level of ECE training**
- **Organizational climate is positive**
- **Regulations are “stronger”**
- **Teachers are self-reflective**
- **Approach to programming is planned, purposeful**

Quality connections (research)

- Government funding other than fee subsidies > better salaries
- Higher training requirements > Higher proportion of ECE staff >
- Not-for-profit auspice > higher salaries, higher training, positive centre climate
- Director has administrative training > positive centre climate
- Government financial assistance for ECE training > more ECE trained staff

(Mostly American and Canadian research)

All amenable to government action through public policy.

Quality at the system level

- Quality at the program level comes from a strong system
- Conditions/elements linked to quality operate as a whole (there is no magic bullet)
- Obstacles to ELCC quality often structural – inadequate financing, unfavourable ratios, poorly qualified/remunerated staff, inadequate educational theory and poor implementation (OECD Country reviews)

A strong* ELCC *system...*

...is the key to ensuring that high quality ELCC programs are the rule, not the exception.

***Well-designed, comprehensive, well-resourced**

The elements of an ELCC system:

Element 1. The ideas: A conceptual framework

- A clear statement of the values that underpin the system (developed through participatory process, periodically reviewed)
- System-level goals for children and families, community, specified groups
- Educational philosophy related to the values and goals (education in a broad sense)
- Curriculum defined as a short general framework.

Element 2. Governance: Roles and responsibilities

- 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

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 ELCC

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

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

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

- Leadership - policy, supervisory, educational and program levels
- Knowledgeable policymakers, post-secondary early childhood instructors and researchers
- Post-secondary ECE training lead staff/degrees
- Human services management training - program supervisory staff
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Good wages
- Working conditions > good morale and low turnover
- System support for program level staff
- Support, respect, recognition for value of the work

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

Element 8. Data, research and evaluation

- 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 summary...

- Quality matters
- Amendable to public policy
- What “works”?

A system, and a systematic approach, not the marketplace

Quality by design, not by default