

An Analysis of Meaningful Performance Measures for Early Childhood Development

Recommendations for the Early Childhood Development Branch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The early years of a child's life is when his or her brain is at its most receptive state and this period presents an opportunity to develop fundamental skills and knowledge that will serve him or her later in life (Anderson, Shinn, Fullilove, Scrimshaw, Fielding, Normand, 2003, p. 32). For this reason, the quality of childhood programs has a profound effect on a child's development. A nurturing and learning environment helps children enter school with resiliency and readiness to learn. Governments have taken action to ensure the accessibility of quality childcare so that future society can benefit from healthy and productive citizens. Monitoring childcare occurs across Canada and amongst the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to account for the significant public investment in early childhood development. Monitoring also serves to enhance the level of quality by identifying strengths and addressing weaknesses.

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) branch reports on the state of Alberta childcare within the Ministry of Human Services' annual business plan. A single performance measure indicates the percentage of childcare providers that are accredited or participating in accreditation. Accreditation is a voluntary process that reflects the Alberta government's commitment to ensure children have the proper supports for a healthy start in life. The ECD branch contracts with the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services (AELCS) to accredit eligible childcare providers. The Ministry has reported the current performance indicator for the past 11 years. Results have plateaued in the last five years at an average of 97%. The consistently high outcome offers little room for growth. Another concern is the reliance on a single indicator to determine the quality of services. For these reasons, the ECD branch would benefit from a review of alternative measures. The research question for this project is:

- *What additional performance indicators would support positive outcomes for children in care?*

The purpose of this project is to identify additional, meaningful measures applicable to the Province's desire to ensure quality childcare by agencies regulated by the Ministry of Human Services. The client for this report is Ms. Suzanne Anselmo, Executive Director of the ECD branch and Statutory Director of the CCLA.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature revealed modest beginnings of childcare as a means to supervise children so their mothers can work outside the home. It was borne out of a need to reduce infant mortality due to the neglect of temporarily abandoned children. Presently, childcare also serves the purpose to increase female labour participation rates (Kamerman, 2000, p.9). Initially childcare consisted of simple custodial care. Its focus was on safety and it produced a variety of structural quality guidelines that involved adherence to matters such as mandatory building codes, criminal records check, and staff to child ratio requirements. The main objective was to protect the child and ensure his or her physical wellbeing.

Advancements in the childcare field shifted the attention to a child's personal growth and research suggested quality features that promote positive child developmental outcomes. The childcare practitioner's qualifications became an integral component of creating these outcomes. Knowledge and training in early childhood development provided caregivers the skills to engage the child in rich interactions and developmentally appropriate activities. These constructive process characteristics positively affect children's impressionable minds and prepare them to thrive as they grow.

OECD countries have a common outlook of sharing childcare responsibilities between the parent and the government (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 40) but there are differences among countries. France and Germany, for example, require government regulated caregivers to have relevant college level education and training. They also demand higher child to staff ratios than other countries (Gormley, 2000, pp. 58-59). Australia and the United States have lower than average qualification standards and place more emphasis on the child's safety and physical wellbeing with strict regulations on building, fire and safety codes (Gromley, 2000, p.62). Canada's provinces and territories also focus their regulatory standards on public health, safety and fire codes. Inspection of childcare facilities may involve a joint effort with other departments to accomplish specific assessments. Alberta is the only province with a voluntary accreditation program that recognizes childcare providers' efforts that go beyond legislated licencing requirements.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design that involved semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A purposive sampling strategy assisted by a snowball sampling method facilitated the recruitment of key individuals with an in-depth understanding of early childhood development activities. A stratified sampling plan engaged different occupation classifications to provide a comprehensive perspective. The sample included 15 participants: two senior managers, two regional managers, three supervisors, four licensing officers and four childcare providers.

The literature and jurisdictional review shaped the interview guide used to garner participant feedback. The guide included a variety of proposed performance measure topics that reflect the direction the research has taken in early childhood care. Respondents provided comments on how the proposed performance measures would perform in the Alberta context. An open dialogue was also encouraged to promote the discovery of areas to explore that can go beyond the list of questions posed. Patterns emerged from the narratives that would form themes that would guide the interpretation of interview findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview guide administered encompassed five major topic areas:

1. Current accreditation performance measure
2. Service quality performance measures
3. Developmental outcomes performance measure

4. Performance measures considered by the ECD branch
5. Key consideration from participants

The current accreditation measure received a divided response amongst participants. Childcare providers interviewed agreed with the current measure and support the higher level of standards it represents. Most of the ECD staff respondents were concerned about how accredited programs can also have a history of non-compliances.

The intent of the accreditation program is to promote a higher benchmark of quality. The provision of grant funds to maintain that level of quality has evolved and expanded since the inception of the accreditation program. The findings suggest that the financial gains may influence the focus of efforts on meeting voluntary accreditation standards at the expense of ensuring mandatory licencing requirements. An understanding of priority obligations is essential to the provision of quality childcare and necessitates collaboration between the licensing and accreditation bodies. An integrated approach between licensing requirements and accreditation standards would provide a truer representation of what it means to be an accredited program.

Service quality performance measures can be either structural or process related. Structural features have quantifiable attributes that involve the physical environment, program plans and staff certifications. Process features are the observed actions that reveal a caregiver's competencies through their interactions with the children, each other and parents. Respondents indicated both the importance of reporting structural quality and the need to expand the ability to examine process quality. Building capacity to monitor and report on staff engagement adds value to the inspections conducted.

Measuring developmental outcomes would provide compelling evidence on whether children are realizing their full developmental and learning potential. Feedback received recognizes its significance as a key metric. However, its suitability as an indicator of ECD branch performance comes into question when considering the variety of external factors that influence a child's developmental scores that are outside the control of the ECD branch.

Participants did not believe monitoring the accessibility and affordability of childcare would be an effective performance measure. Respondents commented that they would not address the quality of care among providers. Moreover, the ECD branch has a limited role in affecting childcare fees or creating childcare spaces and can only provide subsidies to parents or incentivize the availability of spaces by offering operational grants. These indicators would be more informative as research tools to identify areas of need to better direct resources.

Participants had the opportunity to share their ideas of what they believe would be a meaningful performance measure. Key considerations of these respondents stressed the importance of staying current with the research on early childhood development and the application of innovative practices. They also felt that staff's expertise in early learning and care is a determining factor on the quality of services provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings and literature review resulted in four recommendations to introduce additional measures. They range from applying incremental changes to existing system processes to significant changes to regulations. The recommendations would report annual results within a fiscal year period.

Recommendation 1: Percent of regulation compliant childcare providers

- Assesses the proportion of childcare providers that have not been issued a non-compliance during the fiscal year

Recommendation 2: Percent of childcare providers that meet process quality standards

- Include a licensing officer's application of environmental rating scales in their regular inspections

Recommendation 3: Percent of childcare staff employed at each certification level

- Involve standardizing the Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework and requiring ongoing training to maintain certification designation

Recommendation 4: Percent of childcare providers that meet regulatory structural and process standards

- Integrate accreditation process with licensing requirements for enhanced quality standards.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations provide avenues for the ECD branch to consider for improving its current performance measure. They build upon existing efforts to support positive outcomes for children in care given the available resources and leading practices found in early childhood development. Due to the difficulty to separate and identify the impact of a specific initiative on a child, it remains a challenge to attribute causality between a monitoring practice and quality care. Insight garnered from knowledgeable front line workers offers a unique perspective on what could work in the Alberta context. This report presents opportunities for the ECD branch to implement meaningful performance measures that promote accountability and encourages continuous improvement.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Ensuring an ideal environment for early childhood development sets a child on a promising path for a bright future. Quality childcare programs take advantage of early developmental opportunities to promote positive outcomes in school, health and general well-being. The first few years of a child's life are a critical time to develop fundamental skills that prepare them for future learning and success. High quality childcare fosters resilient skills early on and reduces adolescent delinquencies (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 312). A measure of quality in childcare can be against structural standards such as compulsory regulations dictating staff to child ratios or more process focused qualities such as nurturing behaviour and interactions between the staff and child (Howes, Phillips & Whitebook, 1992, p. 450).

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Branch of the Ministry of Human Services of the Government of Alberta is committed to the safety and well-being of children enrolled in childcare programs. The Childcare Licensing Act and Regulations (Childcare Licensing Act, 2013, p. 2) regulates these programs. The ECD branch addresses process-focused requirements by recognizing a high standard of excellence through a voluntary accreditation program. The branch wishes to determine the extent to which programs ensure the quality of childcare delivered. Well-designed indicators provide a means to assess and monitor progress towards Branch and Ministry outcomes that focus on what is best for children in care. Meaningful performance metrics foster continuous improvement and promote accountability. Measures should align with Ministry objectives, endorsed by the Branch and supported by the front line staff to ensure successful implementation.

The client for this project is Ms. Suzanne Anselmo. Ms. Anselmo is the Executive Director of the ECD Branch and the Statutory Director of the Child Care Act and Regulations. She has the authority to approve ECD performance measures that support better outcomes for children in care. Enforcement of the Childcare Licensing Act and Regulations, the provision of childcare subsidies, and endorsement of accreditation services are the current tools employed to meet this objective. The ECD Branch is located in Edmonton and provides direction to eight regions that apply licensing administration requirements throughout the province.

Alberta's childcare system is comprised of regulated and unregulated program providers. Regulated programs are licensed or approved and are required to meet mandatory quality standards to operate. Unregulated programs are private babysitting arrangements. The ECD Branch provides government funding to regulated providers that include a childcare subsidy program to assist parental access to otherwise unaffordable childcare. These providers offer incentives through an accreditation program intended to improve the quality of childcare by supporting certified staff through wage top-ups, staff attraction incentives and staff development grants (Alberta Human Services, 2015a).

The ECD Branch is exploring options to replace its current performance measure on accreditation reported in the Ministry of Human Services' Annual Business Plan. The Accreditation Performance Measure indicates "the percentage of licensed day care centres and contracted family day home agencies that are accredited or participating in accreditation"

(Government of Alberta, 2014, p. 12). The accreditation result for 2014/15 is 97%. Previous results show it has plateaued at 96% in 2013/14, 98% in 2012/13, 97% in 2011/12 and 96% in 2010/11 (Government of Alberta, 2014, p. 12). Achieving accreditation status is voluntary and demonstrates a higher level of excellence that goes beyond standard childcare licensing regulations. A consistently high performance measure average of 97% leaves limited room for improvement. Measuring performance loses its effect over time when meeting targets consistently and with little incentive to do better (Coulson, 2009, p. 276). It is also a concern to rely on a single performance measure as the sole indicator of quality services provided. For this reason, the ECD Branch wishes to explore additional measures that align with the Ministry's outcome goals. Employing different measures can provide a more comprehensive approach in assessing the level of quality childcare.

The main research question driving this project is:

- *What additional performance indicators would support positive outcomes for children in care?*

The report will review developments in the field of childcare and explore how other jurisdictions track their progress in supporting children in care. Findings from this part of the research helped craft the interview guide that includes new measures for consideration. At the core of this report is an interview of ECD staff and childcare providers to determine whether the ECD branch can apply those proposed measures.

The report involves eight chapters, which includes this Introduction chapter. The second chapter considers the background and history of measuring performance in government-supported childcare. It explores previous strategies and identifies gaps in the system. The third chapter reviews the relevant childcare literature from accredited scholars and examines other jurisdictions' indicators. The fourth chapter outlines the approach used to gather interview feedback of proposed indicators from participants involved in the delivery of ECD services. The fifth chapter reveals the findings from the interviews conducted and discusses the findings and key points made by interviewees. The seventh chapter presents options to consider and offers recommendations. The last chapter concludes the report.

2.0 BACKGROUND

As the first of its kind in Alberta, the current accreditation program for childcare programs was borne out of the need to enhance a child's early experiences in regulated childcare programs. Contributing to this goal involves attracting and retaining childcare workers. A stable and well-trained workforce maintains the quality of care that promotes positive developmental outcomes for children (Klinkner, Riley, & Roach, 2005, p. 90).

Alberta's strong and growing economy in 2000, coupled with traditionally low pay for childcare workers gave way to high staff turnover throughout the province. Children in programs with inconsistent staff arrangements had poorer language and social development skills (Alberta Children Services, 2001, p. 80). In an attempt to address this growing concern, the Alberta government introduced the Childcare Accreditation program in 2004. The initial accreditation performance measure was published in the Ministry's annual report in 2006 as the "percentage of licensed day care centres and contracted family day home agencies that are accredited" with a baseline result of 16.5% (Alberta Children Services, 2006, p. 38). The program's popularity grew when the government announced additional enhancements involving the 'staff attraction incentive allowance' in 2007 and broadened childcare equivalencies that certified professionals with related human services disciplines in 2008. Out of school care programs were included in the accreditation program in 2009. Influenced by these developments, the number of accreditations noticeably increased from 2006/07 to 2009/10 but dropped slightly in 2010/11 (Alberta Children and Youth Services, 2011, p. 18). In 2011/12, the measure varied slightly to include programs participating in accreditation. Results of the revised measure remained consistent and averaged 97% for the next four years. Figure 1 illustrates the results of both accreditation measures.

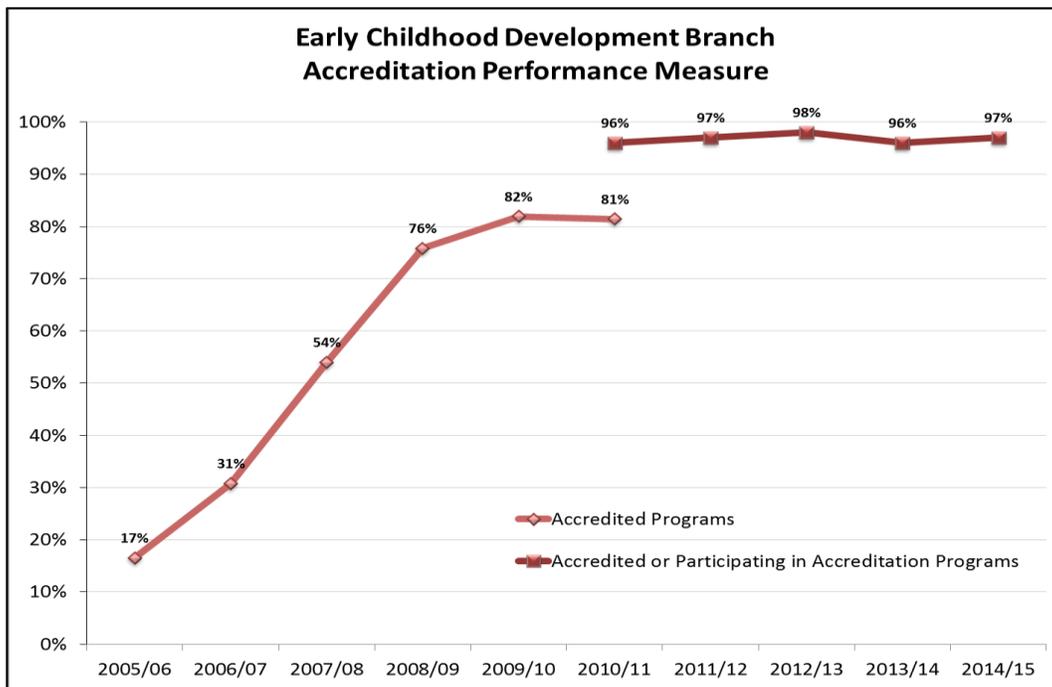


Figure 1 Results of Accreditation Performance Measure

During the 11-year period the accreditation measure was reported in the Ministry's annual report, progress of other initiatives and accomplishments by the ECD branch were not reported. Measuring the performance of other developments can be potential indicators for future reporting. The current measure does not reflect revisions made to the Act, promotion of childcare spaces or amendments to subsidy policies.

In 2008, the Alberta government proclaimed the Childcare Licensing Act. It provided a more flexible framework for licensing childcare that met the evolving needs of parents and promoted the creation of more childcare programs. In the same year, the government also announced the creation of a childcare choices plan that supported the creation of 14,000 new spaces over three years to mitigate long wait lists. Accessibility to affordable quality childcare continues to be a concern despite exceeding the goal by 4,000 spaces in 2011. Measuring progress towards availability of programs can be challenging as the government does not own or operate childcare facilities. Despite the government's efforts to incentivize the creation of spaces, the relatively high cost of childcare can still be a hindrance.

Childcare subsidies are available to eligible low-income parents. Prior to the accreditation measure, the previous performance measure for childcare monitored the number of families accessing childcare subsidy who indicate a positive impact for their children. The subsidy program has evolved since then and included an income threshold increase to \$50,000 from \$31,500 in 2011 to accommodate more families in need.

The ECD Branch has expanded and further developed its ability to deliver support within the childcare sector during the period the accreditation performance measure. Implementing additional indicators can reflect this support. New measures would also allow the opportunity to guide the continuous improvement of services offered by highlighting areas that are lacking. Investigating what specific measures are meaningful would provide a more comprehensive perspective on the ECD branch's overall performance.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review examines childcare's early development and governments' progressive involvement. The review will consider conditions that instigated the initial need for childcare and influenced its growth. It will focus on childcare progress in Canada including society's expectations and the responses from the federal and provincial levels of government. It will also explore approaches to childcare in other countries. Next, the literature review will concentrate on how the provinces and territories promote early childhood development within their jurisdiction. Finally, it will consider specific studies investigating the distinct qualities of childcare as a step towards developing potential performance measures.

Identifying the relevant literature to shape this review began with the use of keywords in broad databases of the University of Victoria Library, Government of Alberta Library and Google Scholar. Broad search patterns revealed a number of specific websites specializing in child development research. Through the course of gathering material, other descriptive words applied by academics added to the list of search terms used. Synonymous descriptions for childcare included day nurseries, day care, early childhood development and early childhood education and care. A selection of material collected included published research, journal articles, books and professional literature. The search for material ended when findings and arguments began to reveal a recurring theme without contributing new information.

DAY NURSERIES IN THE 1900S

At the turn of the 20th century, Canada's major cities grew extensively (Goheen, 1980, p. 78). Urbanization and industrialization in the early 1900s provided employment opportunities for women to supplement their household income. Mothers without family or friends to care for their children while they worked would either send them to school with their older siblings or have them fend for themselves alone at home (Durst, 2005, p. 141). This created a concern with overcrowding classrooms and high infant mortality rates (Prochner, 2011, p. 40). Day cares, historically known as day nurseries or creche, emerged to address these issues. These nurseries were located in the poorest city districts. They catered to mothers who needed to earn a living wage to keep their families together (Varga, 1997, p. 20). Most mothers were widows or had husbands who did not earn enough to support the family.

Funding for the day nurseries primarily came from philanthropic support, donations and fundraising activities organized by prominent women from the upper echelons of society (Durst, 2005, p. 143). Varga (1997) noted how parental fees were nominal to ensure a modicum of dignity so that mothers would not feel like charity recipients (p. 19). As one of the earliest day nurseries in Canada, the Local Council of Women organized the establishment of the Edmonton Creche and Day Nursery Society. These women garnered support from their social and political ties. The nursery had honorary board members that included local and provincial government officials (Prochner, 2011, p. 46). The Local Council of Women convinced the city of the benefits of day nurseries as a preventative measure that mitigates the need for social support by providing mothers the opportunity to pursue gainful employment (Prochner, 2011, p. 47). As a result, the city provided a municipal operating grant and building to further their cause. In

Vancouver, the city constructed one of the first buildings dedicated to a day nursery in 1914 due to the lobbying efforts of the city's Medical Health Officer who believed day nurseries would reduce the city's high infant mortality rates (p. 49)

CHILDCARE IN ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD) COUNTRIES

OECD countries share a common outlook about how caring for the child is a shared responsibility between the family and the government (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 40). Kamerman (2000) noted that the main impetus for some countries is child focused with an emphasis on children's well-being and school readiness while others see the economic benefits of increased female labour participation (p. 9). For most OECD countries, Kamerman (2000) found a positive correlation between the breadth of available childcare resources and mothers in the workforce (p. 9). Likewise, Lambert (2008) discovered a positive relationship between "mother-friendly" (p. 334) employment policies and the number of receptive female political leaders in power.

The provision of childcare in OECD countries can be an exercise in administrative integration, decentralization or privatization (Neuman, 2005, p. 133). The USA, Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Italy, The Netherlands, and Portugal divide the administrative and policy making responsibilities between "care" and "pre-school" classifications which may fall under education or welfare jurisdictions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 76). Overlapping responsibilities may occur with coordination required across departments to facilitate the delivery of services in a coherent fashion. The USA, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands decentralized the authority from a national level to more local authorities that provided more client focused services geared towards specific local needs (De Vries, 2000, p. 197). De Vries also notes, however, that this can lead to inconsistencies in quality of care across jurisdictions (p. 199). Decentralization of control can also make it easier to privatize services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 81). Privatization can be an option to increase the quantity and quality of services through competition. However, providers are still required to follow established regulations to continue operation (Neuman, 2005, p. 137).

Countries that regulate childcare share the same intent to assure parents that facilities meet minimum quality standards (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 65). The details of childcare regulations differ based on a country's philosophy and political framework. Regulations can focus on the provider, child or facility. The level of education and training of a provider's staff is more highly regarded in some countries than in others. For instance, France and Germany require specialized college level education and training. Both countries rationalize how their well-trained workforce justifies higher child-staff ratios (Gormley, 2000, pp. 58 – 59). Gormley (2000) further states that the consequence of a well-educated workforce is the expense of employing workers with advanced credentials. However, a benefit of meeting the higher salary demands is a more stable workforce (p. 62). A lower staff turnover rate may benefit the child's development (Friendly, Doherty, & Beach, 2006, p. 12). In Sweden, frequent interaction with staff is encouraged. Their lower child to staff ratios coupled with well-

trained staff provide the child with the attention needed to develop appropriately (Gromley, 2000, p. 62). Australia and the United States have less defined childcare training and education requirements (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 100). Compared to other OECD countries, both countries have lower qualification standards. The United States places more emphasis on the physical shelter of the child where accidents are mitigated through strict adherence to building, fire and safety codes (Gromley, 2000, p. 62).

Meeting regulatory requirements is costly and can require government aid. The cost of childcare is significant and is often set against the benefits of increased labour force participation. Affordability can be the main determinant governing a family's choice for childcare (Moodie-Dyer, 2011, p. 39). Directly providing parents with childcare subsidy so they may pursue employment or advance their qualifications would ultimately promote self-reliance (Joo, 2008, p. 311). If the cost of childcare is beyond their means, parents may resort to unregulated care or private babysitting arrangements that may operate within high-risk conditions. This could be a detrimental decision as the health and safety of a child are critical determinants for successful development and long-term wellbeing (Crowley, Jeon, & Rosenthal, 2013, p. 52). Government funding can apply to the program or to the parent. A supply-side investment model where the government directly funds programs on behalf of parents promotes a more consistent quality of care and ensures accountability of public funds (OECD, 2004, pp. 7-9). However, funding parents directly could have the effect of empowering the demand side and place pressure on programs to offer a high quality of care to stay competitive (Johnson, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012, p. 1457). Government subsidies or government run facilities aid with the cost of childcare in most OECD European countries. Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway offer a comprehensive childcare system where the state covers the largest share of costs and parental fees are income tested or capped at a certain level (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, p. 51). In North America and Britain, parental fees serve as the main funding source to cover childcare operating costs (Kamerman, 2000, p. 15).

Canadian Government Involvement in Childcare

The Second World War encouraged the federal and provincial governments to take a more active role in supporting day nurseries. Pasolli (2015) argued that the government's initial motivation to provide childcare was to address the country's labour needs (p. 6). War provided employment opportunities for struggling mothers. The federal government sponsored childcare to support the war effort. The intent was to support mothers employed in war related jobs. In 1942, the Public Welfare Act of Ontario included support for day nurseries. In the same year, the federal government proposed a cross-provincial cost sharing initiative called the Authorization of Agreements with Provinces for the Care of Children. In 1943, the Dominion-Provincial Agreement for Wartime Day Nurseries provided provinces the authority to establish regulations for day nursery operations. The promotion of day nurseries during this time also shifted the focus towards the child and further developed early childhood education principles and practices (Prochner, 2011, p. 54).

During the post-war years, the federal government ceased wartime nursery funding and as a result, provinces received pressure from mothers to continue the childcare support they relied

on (Varga, 1997, p. 75). Rallies and protests led by women's groups, labour unions and church organizations occurred in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver (Pasolli, 2015, p. 25). The Government of Ontario responded to this public pressure with the introduction of the Day Nurseries Act in 1946 to ensure families in need had affordable childcare (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2005, p. 47). In 1966, federal funding came through the Canada Assistance Plan that covered half of provincial subsidies provided to low-income families. Provinces established minimum standards of care for children and training for childcare practitioners. Traditional day nurseries transformed beyond custodial programs that once served to meet the employment needs of mothers to a focus on managing and supporting the development of the child. Specific training in child development became a sought after characteristic of workers who wished to enter the childcare field (Varga, 1997, p. 81).

INTERPRETATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

In 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women supported the women's movement when the Commission determined that childcare was necessary to support women's right to work (Pasolli, 2015, p. 29). The systemic issue of women's inability to access the workforce was also recognized by the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality of Employment (Timpson, 2001, p. 116), leading the federal government to commit to developing a national childcare strategy (Timpson, 2001, p. 150). In the 1980s and 90s the Conservative and Liberal parties made election promises for a national childcare plan that included additional funding and a promise for additional spaces (Friendly, 2001, p. 32). Despite electoral wins, both declarations did not materialize. In 1996, the Canada Health and Social Transfer policy replaced the Canadian Assistance Plan. The shared cost program was changed to a block-funding model where a lump sum payment was given to provinces to be distributed to social programs of their choice.

The increased labour force participation of mothers with young children influenced the change in interpretation of the government's responsibilities towards childcare. Initially, governments reserved involvement to regulating licenced care and providing subsidies to families in need. However, consultations conducted by the federal government showed that public opinion had shifted to a call for more direct involvement to promote childcare services as a means to alleviate poverty (Doherty, Beach & Friendly, 2003, p. 21). The challenge involves negotiating a national childcare policy between the federal and provincial governments (Cleveland, Gordon, & Krashinsky, 2001, p. 23). While the federal government provides financial resources, the provinces must administer the funds and meet federal expectations.

PROVINCIAL OVERVIEW OF CHILDCARE DELIVERY

The provision of childcare as a social service is a provincial responsibility supported by legislation (Friendly, Turiano, & Beach, 2002, p. 14). Apart from Quebec, parents primarily receive financial assistance from federal tax breaks, block funding provincial transfers, or subsidies for low-income earners (Ferns, & Friendly, 2014, pp. 4-5). Providers also receive financial aid from the provincial government to assist in daily operations. Table 1 shows the summary of provincial and territorial approaches to childcare delivery.

TABLE 1

Provincial and Territorial Approaches to Childcare

Province	Governance	Regulatory standards	Available funding
Newfoundland and Labrador	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development	Inspections are conducted at least once per year by childcare, safety and health inspectors of the provincial government. Minor infractions to serious violations result in a verbal warning to a licence cancellation (Newfoundland and Labrador. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2005a, p. 13).	Grant funding provided to Early Childhood Educator (ECE) graduates and those who choose to upgrade their qualifications. Start up and equipment grants provided to facilities. Fee subsidies offered to facilities on behalf of families on income support. (Newfoundland and Labrador. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2005b, p. 3)
Prince Edward Island	Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture	Facilities are inspected once per year by provincial safety and health inspectors as well as by the Fire Marshall's office. Centres not in compliance may receive a provisional licence or have their licence revoked (Prince Edward Island. Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2010, pp. 3-6)	Grant funding is available for daily operations, care of infants younger than two, and special needs children. Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Prince Edward Island. Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2014, p. 3).
Nova Scotia	Department of Education & Early Childhood Development	Annual announced and unannounced inspections conducted by licencing officers. Licenses can be cancelled, suspended or not renewed if serious infractions are observed. Health inspections are conducted by the Department of Agriculture and fire inspections are conducted by the Department of Labour and Advanced Education (Nova Scotia. Department of Education & Early Childhood Development, 2011, s13(1)).	Forgivable loans up to a certain percentage are offered to help expand, replace, repair or renovate facilities. Operating grants are provided to full and part day licensed centres. Stabilization grants are offered to assist in attracting and retaining staff. Supported Childcare Grants are available to build capacity related to the delivery of an inclusive program. Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Nova Scotia. Department of Education & Early Childhood Development. 2015, p. 7).
New Brunswick	Department of Education	Centres receive one announced inspection and	Quality Improvement Funding Support Program is offered to

	and Early Childhood Development	up to three unannounced inspections per year. Public Health and Fire Inspections are also required (New Brunswick. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 14).	attract and retain workers by increasing wages. Special Needs funding can be granted to facilities with children who have high support needs. Income tested fee subsidies are provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families. Start-up funding available to increase number of spaces. Training Assistance provided for ECE upgrading (New Brunswick. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016, para. 1)
Quebec	Ministere de la Famille	An inspection must be conducted every five years. Centres are provided an opportunity to rectify non-compliances. Repeated instances may result in losing their licence through a court hearing (Quebec. Ministere de la Famille, 2016, p. 2).	Childcare fees are subsidized and includes the same basic contribution applied to all families as well as an additional contribution made towards the income tax return that is adjusted to the family's income (Quebec. Revenu Quebec, 2015, para. 3)
Ontario	Ministry of Education	Inspections are conducted annually. Repeated non-compliances of a serious nature can result in licence refusal. Licensing childcare is the responsibility of provincial government. However, managing delivery of childcare is the responsibility of the municipal government (Ontario. Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 6).	Wage subsidies are provided to staff to help attract and retain workers (Ontario. Ministry of Education, 2014b, p. 2). Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Ontario. Ministry of Education, 2014b, p. 7)
Manitoba	Ministry of Family Services	Minimum of three inspections a year are conducted. Inspections involve fire, health and general safety codes. (Manitoba. Ministry of Family Services, 2015a, p. 46)	Operating grants are provided to centres. Income tested fee subsidies available to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Manitoba. Ministry of Family Services, 2015b, para. 3).
Saskatchewan	Ministry of Education	Minimum of two inspections conducted annually. Provisional licenses can be issued if serious non-	Capital, school-based and start-up grants provided for new space creation (Saskatchewan. Ministry of

		compliances are found (Saskatchewan. Ministry of Education, 2014, pp. 8-9).	Education, 2015, pp.77-78). Enriched learning grants for materials and program supplies are offered (Saskatchewan. Ministry of Education, 2015, pp.79). Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Saskatchewan. Ministry of Education, 2015, pp. 102)
Alberta	Ministry of Human Services	Minimum of two inspections are conducted per year (Alberta, 2015, p. 16). A variety of enforcement actions are available (Alberta, 2015, p. 20). Providers can appeal decisions of the statutory director (Alberta, 2015, p. 22).	Staff Support Funding is offered to help retain workers with wage top ups. Staff Attraction Incentive Allowance is also offered to newly hired staff. Benefit Contribution Grant is meant to offset mandatory employer contributions from the added staff support funding (Alberta Human Services, 2015, para. 4). Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Alberta. Ministry of Human Services, 2016, para. 1).
British Columbia	Ministry of Children and Family Development is responsible for providing funding and support to childcare programs and services. The Ministry of Health is responsible for the licensing, monitoring and inspection of the facilities.	There are no legislated minimum or maximum number of inspections conducted. Inspections are based on risk assessment and generally occur annually (British Columbia. Ministry of Health, 2013, p. 12).	Operational funding is available based on enrollment and age of child (British Columbia. Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2016a, para. 2). Major and minor capital funding for emergency repair or upgrade to comply with licencing requirements is offered (British Columbia. Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2016b, para. 2). Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (British Columbia. Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2016c, para. 3).
Northwest Territories	Department of Education,	Inspected annually by Early Childhood Program, Public	Grants provided to staff taking Early Childhood Education

	Culture and Employment	Health Department and Fire Marshall's office (Northwest Territories. Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2016a, p. 15)	courses (Northwest Territories. Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2016b, para. 1).
Nunavut	Department of Education	Inspected annually by Early Childhood Program, Public Health Department and Fire Marshall's office (Nunavut. Department of Education, 2016a, p. 3).	Grants provided for Operation and Maintenance, Health and Safety, and Start-Up contributions help pay for equipment and materials (Nunavut. Department of Education, 2016b, para 13-15).
Yukon	Department of Health and Social Services	Unannounced inspections are conducted annually by government childcare, fire and environmental health inspectors. Programs not in compliance can have their direct operating grant frozen. (Yukon. Department of Health and Social Services, 2015a, p. 41).	Start up, operating, training, building costs funding offered (Yukon. Department of Health and Social Services, 2015b, para 1). Income tested fee subsidies provided to facilities on behalf of eligible families (Yukon. Department of Health and Social Services, 2015c, para 1).

QUALITY EFFECTS OF CHILDCARE CENTRES

Initial research in the childcare field examined whether children attending childcare facilities developed differently from those raised at home. Anderson, Nagle, Roberts, & Smith (1981) found that children responded with higher levels of attachment behaviours towards a highly involved caregiver compared to a stranger (p. 59). In terms of cognitive development, an unrelated caregiver who actively provided intellectual stimulation and encouraged language development in children was a strong predictive factor of the child's IQ (Carew & Clarke-Stewart, 1980, p. 68). Rich learning environments and engaging interactions with trained staff in childcare centres have a positive impact on children's cognitive and language development (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Childcare Research Network, 2000, p. 977).

Structural factors such as staff to child ratios can influence process factors that involve the quantity and quality of interactions a child has with his or her caregiver. Higher ratios provide staff with more opportunity to attend to the sensitive needs of the child. Howes et al. (1992) compared ratio regulations and discovered that the addition of just one more child can produce a negative impact on the quality of care provided (p. 458). Moreover, higher staff to child ratio of trained caregivers applying developmentally appropriate activities contributes to higher quality care (p. 459). Rose & Elicker (2008) discovered the education level of caregivers received one of the highest rating scores of importance amongst employed mothers (p.1170). Direct childcare experience and safety was also one of the top factors desired of providers (Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005, p. 412). In a similar study, Shlay (2010) examined preferences of

different ethnicities and found high staff to child ratios were consistently valued by all parental ethnic groups (p. 139).

Process quality was significantly elevated in childcare centres operating under stricter regulatory requirements that focused on staff qualifications and staff to child ratios (Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997, p. 301). Multiple studies have found warmth and attention towards their children as the top desirable trait parents look for in caregivers (Isapa, Thornburg, & Venter-Barkley, 1998, p. 10; Raikes, Wilcox, Peterson, Hegland, Atwater, Summers, & Edwards, 2005, p. 3; Rose & Elicker, 2008, p. 1170). Promoting a child's optimal development through tailored activities that fosters confidence was a significant quality perceived by parents (Gamble, Ewing, & Wilhlem, 2009, p.79). In public pre-kindergarten programs, parents valued regular communication with staff to know more about their child's progress (Barbarin, McCandies, Early, Clifford, Bryant, Burchinal, & Pianta, 2006, p. 634).

Quality childcare can have a more positive impact on children with challenging economic circumstances; children from disadvantaged backgrounds that were provided childcare experienced better outcomes than their upper-class counterparts who displayed negative results (Havnes & Mogstad, 2014, p.101). Given the opportunity, quality childcare enhanced cognitive, language, and social development amongst children of lower income families (Love, Kisker, Ross, Schochet, Brooks-Gunn, Paulsell, Boller, Constantine, Vogel, Fuligni, & Brady-Smith, 2002, pp. 197-207).

SUMMARY

The literature highlights how urbanization changed the traditional roles of women and created a new service industry in the early 1900s. Borne from an economic necessity, the first day nurseries were essentially custodial care for children of mothers who had to work. These day nurseries had little regard for staff training, learning and play material or scheduled timetables. They were inexpensive to manage and essentially relied on charitable donations. World War II increased the need for day nurseries to encourage women to enter the workforce and aid in the war effort. The way day nurseries operated during this period slowly evolved from a holding area for children meant to reduce infant mortality through adult supervision towards nurturing the child and promoting optimal development through evidence-based better practices.

Expanding the role of childcare requires government involvement for the best interest of society. Parents concerned about quality of care may not be fully aware of the characteristics of the childcare operator chosen to look after their child. Regulations help assure parents that their children are safe. Government intervention plays a role in affecting the quality of care by standardizing structural factors relating to staff qualifications, group size and safety codes. Regular inspections monitor compliance to regulations. Government activities also promote process factors about child engagement and the type of interactions children in care experience.

Well-trained staff with relevant experience, available developmentally appropriate activities and higher staff to child ratios positively influences a child's development. As cost increases as a function of quality, the choice for unregulated care can prove to be more enticing for parents who cannot afford the price of high quality childcare. Properly administered subsidies are

required to ensure families can access high quality care. There is an expectation for provincial and territorial governments to promote a well-educated and stable workforce as well as supporting affordable and available quality care for children.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This project adopted a qualitative research design that employs semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A qualitative design is an appropriate approach because it seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the issue through the expression of individual thoughts, concerns and ideas not readily captured by other means (Patton, 2015, p. 14). The interviews explored the type of performance measures that would be of value for those involved with childcare. Information sought relies on the participants' knowledge and experience in their respective roles within the childcare field. The range of participants' expertise involves providing direct childcare services, monitoring childcare providers' adherence to regulations, or managing province-wide ECD initiatives. The interview process included a review of the current performance measure, a discussion on standards employed by other jurisdictions and identification of innovative indicators that highlight progress towards better outcomes for children.

SAMPLE

The project's purposive sampling strategy employed a snowball sampling method that had initial participants nominate successive participants who were believed would offer added insight. A stratified plan engaged different occupation classifications to provide varied perspectives. The intent was to identify information-rich cases from a small sample (Patton, 2015, p. 308). Sampling began with two senior managers within the ECD branch. One is responsible for interpreting the policies and setting the direction of ECD activities and the other has a quality assurance function that involves managing internal and external performance measures. Both senior managers have an in-depth understanding of ECD from a province-wide perspective and are in regular contact with regional representatives. These senior managers proposed regional managers and supervisors they believe would benefit the project. The regional managers and supervisors in turn suggested licencing officers who would be ideal candidates for the study. The licencing officers would each have a caseload of childcare providers. At the end of the licencing officers' interviews, they recommended potential childcare providers within their caseload for the study. The sample included 15 participants: two senior managers, two regional managers, three supervisors, four licencing officers and four childcare providers. As reflected in the sample's representation, the project's objective was to gain the most insight from those engaged in frontline services.

INSTRUMENT

The semi-structured interviews followed the interview guide included in Appendix A. Turner (2010) explains how a series of open-ended questions provide participants the opportunity to answer with as much detail as they wish which can also lead to difficulties determining how to code the varied amount of information captured (p. 756). The line of questioning begins with a review of the current performance measure as a primer to introduce a familiar indicator and to have participants consider possible information gaps inherent with that measure. The next set of questions introduces subject areas other jurisdictions have focused their efforts on. A discussion would then lead to how those areas can be fashioned to applicable indicators in the Alberta

context. The next few questions involve other key domains the ECD branch supports. The final question allows respondents the opportunity to reveal their own thoughts on what kind of measures they would like to have more focus on.

The open dialogue led by the interview guide promotes the discovery of new ideas and reveals other areas to explore that goes beyond the list of questions posed. The interview format is flexible to pursue relevant information through probing questions. Respondents are encouraged to speak freely and use their own words to describe what meaningful measures would look like to them. The interview guide provides a structure that allows for a comparison of results between participants (Turner, 2010, p. 756). Interviews conducted were mindful of the unique perspectives and concerns within each participant group.

ANALYSIS

The researcher used written notes as the data collection method during the in-depth interviews. Each participant had an opportunity to review transcribed data at the end of the interview to ensure completeness and accuracy of ideas captured. The following step involved coding responses manually by identifying patterns of meaningful words and concepts mentioned that reflect the participants' key messages (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008, p. 151). Devising the coding framework was an iterative process that ensured coding boundaries are distinct and focused (Attride-Sterling, 2001, p. 391). The researcher then established themes from the crafted codes. An overall review of consolidated information was the next step to further refine and finalize themes.

LIMITATIONS

The snowball sampling strategy may not yield the ideal information-rich participants sought. The fire in Fort McMurray and the popularity of the summer months to take vacations limited the pool of participants. Employees took time off work because they were evacuated, unavailable due to supporting the wildfire recovery effort or were taking their holidays. As a result, recruitment of the next recommended participant was required to fulfill the stratified selection criteria.

Without being able to witness telling non-verbal cues, interviews conducted over the phone can miss opportunities for further probing. Observed pauses or hesitation prompted further questioning for more clarification and examples to encourage a confident response. The end of the individual interviews involved a recap of feedback provided to ensure the accurate capture of key thoughts. The possibility also exists for misinterpretation and overanalyzing of results due to the absence of another researcher to validate codes and themes developed. To mitigate bias, the literature and jurisdictional review guided the thematic analysis.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter summarizes the opinions, ideas, and impressions revealed through participant interviews. This chapter also integrates the themes shared by the interview participants within the context of the literature review and the jurisdictional scan conducted. It will review the proposed performance measures contributions towards accountability and promote continuous improvement within childcare. The Early Childhood Development (ECD) staff and childcare providers were individually engaged to consider a range of additional performance measures to replace or supplement the current accreditation performance measure. There were 15 participants interviewed that included two senior managers, two regional managers, three supervisors, four licensing officers and four childcare providers. Aside from the two senior managers who work at the corporate level, the study received most of its feedback from the regional front lines.

The organization of this chapter follows the interview guide's outlined topics. The questions begin with an examination of the status quo to determine whether the current performance measure warrants a revision. The following section investigates the value of quality indicators revealed through the jurisdictional scan and literature review. The next section focuses on a holistic measurement of outcomes as opposed to outputs. Participants then reflected on performance measures suggested by the ECD branch. These measures consider accessibility and affordability factors along with the quality of childcare programs. For the last part of the interview, participants had the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience in proposing other performance measures they would like to see implemented. The key topic areas explored are:

- Current accreditation performance measure
- Service quality performance measures
- Developmental outcomes performance measure
- Performance measures considered by the ECD branch
- Key consideration from participants

CURRENT ACCREDITATION PERFORMANCE MEASURE

FINDINGS

The ECD branch introduced the original version of the current measure in 2006 to monitor the development of the accreditation program. Through the next 10 years, the number of accredited programs steadily increased and currently comprises the majority of day care and family day home agencies. As a result, the percentage of programs accredited or participating in accreditation plateaued from 2010 to 2015 with little room for further growth. Given the current state of affairs, the interview began with a reflection on the measure's merit.

From the main branch, one senior manager thought the current accreditation measure still "provides assurance that children are in programs meeting standards that are over and above licensing requirements." The other senior manager noted the "challenge when 97% are

supposed to be quality programs yet some have suspended licences. There's no objective sense of quality.”

From the regional front line level, eight of the 15 participants said the measure does not reflect the work conducted by licensing officers. These participants included two regional managers, two supervisors, and four licensing officers who observed from routine licensing inspections that childcare providers are more motivated to comply with voluntary accreditation standards as opposed to mandatory licensing regulations. Licensing officers in particular were concerned about how childcare providers overlook licensing requirements designed to assure the safety and wellbeing of children in favour of funding received as a result of maintaining their accreditation status. The licensing officers mentioned how childcare providers would offer excuses that they were not able to meet regulations because they were preoccupied with meeting accreditation requirements.

One licensing officer stated, “my pet peeve is how they ask about how to get accredited but not so much how to adhere to regulations. There are programs with so many non-compliances that are accredited.” Another licensing officer felt “we could do a better job working together and collaborating...always wished we have better communication with accreditation.” She continued to suggest a way “to notify accreditation if we see major non-compliances.”

From the provider perspective, four caregivers believed the current accreditation measure does make programs accountable for a high level of quality. One provider felt the accreditation status “makes my organization want to achieve more. Since it started, my program has become better. It makes us want to grow and achieve more and have higher programming standards. We take it incredibly seriously. We have higher standards of where we want to take our programming. I feel it's a great way to measure our program. If my staff doesn't want to be accredited they don't work for me.”

Another provider did not want to lose sight of the overall positive aspects of the current measure. She questioned how a provider received fair warning of when the accreditation inspection is to occur. The provider commented how some programs “may bring in additional staff to boost scoring points to meet standards. It's not right.”

DISCUSSION

The introduction of Alberta's childcare accreditation program in 2004 intended to promote a higher benchmark of quality that goes beyond regulatory requirements and approved standards. The interview findings show that all childcare providers strive for this ideal and feel the current measure reflects that effort. They believe a measure that monitors providers participating in accreditation encourages the delivery of high quality of care. The financial gains are an additional benefit used as an incentive to maintain the elevated level of quality achieved. The overarching objective shared by the ECD branch's accreditation program and the providers interviewed for this study is to further positive outcomes for children.

The current accreditation measure gauges the potential for providers to offer quality childcare services. Qualifying for accreditation allows providers the opportunity to access a variety of

grants primarily aimed towards attracting and retaining qualified staff. Childcare providers interviewed identified that a low staff turnover is important and maintaining staff levels is a challenge without support. Cleveland, Gunderson, & Hyatt (2003) argued that the traditionally low wages provided to caregivers contributes to “high turnover, low quality, few opportunities for promotion and advancement, and little incentive for human capital acquisition (p. 296). Providers rely on accreditation funds to supplement wages in order to remain competitive in a job market. High staff to child ratio was one of the key predictors of higher quality of care (Friendly, Doherty, & Beach, 2006, p. 11). Accreditation grants also encourage childcare workers to advance their knowledge in early childhood development. A strong positive relationship exists between the effects on quality and a childcare operator’s education, training and experience in early childhood development (Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman, & LaGrange, 2006, p. 297). The main grant the accreditation program offers is a wage top-up to reduce staff turnover. Klinkner, Riley, & Roach (2005) identified that staff retention is critical to promoting positive developmental outcomes for children. The array of accreditation funding grants offered by the ECD branch supports program quality by attracting, sustaining, and developing childcare staff. Feedback received from interviews with providers revealed the importance of keeping their staff trained and well compensated to continue to deliver quality care.

While the interview findings indicate that providers are looking forward in developing their programs to meet the needs of children in their care, licencing officers feel that providers also need to look back and first meet basic requirements. The ECD staff interviewed shared concerns about the public’s assumption that regulatory requirements have been satisfied before a program received accreditation status. An underlying issue is how accreditation standards and regulatory bodies are independent from childcare licencing. A provider who meets the minimum licencing requirements that allow for continued operation can also potentially qualify for accreditation status. Based on the feedback received from ECD frontline staff, there are instances where providers have been found to be engrossed with securing accreditation grants at the expense of meeting regulatory standards. An ECD staff and childcare provider interviewed mentioned providers would sometimes schedule additional staff from other programs to work in the same program when an accreditation inspection is to occur. This behavioural gaming conduct intentionally shifts resources on activities measured to win approval at the risk of compromising other areas (Coulson, 2009, p. 277).

In a high stakes environment of publicly reporting a Ministry’s performance measure, advertising a consistently high participation rate is appealing. Validity comes into question when accreditation and licencing are not aware of each other’s activities. This can misconstrue the perception of what it means to be an accredited childcare program. An understanding of priority requirements is essential to the provision of quality childcare and necessitates collaboration between the licencing and accreditation bodies. This integrated approach between licencing requirements and accreditation standards would provide a truer representation of what it means to be an accredited program.

SERVICE QUALITY PERFORMANCE MEASURES

FINDINGS

The next set of interview questions explored measuring the quality of childcare. Quality can be further broken down to either a structural or a process component. A structurally focused performance measure would have objectively designed metrics and quantifiable outputs. These can include evaluating compliance to licencing standards. A process focused performance measure would involve observations and subjective assessments of interactions within a childcare facility.

With regard to implementing a structural focused performance measure, seven out of the 15 respondents felt that measuring compliance to licensing regulations should replace or supplement the current performance measure. The seven participants include a senior manager, regional manager, supervisor, two licensing officers and two providers. They indicated the importance of conforming to regulations. One of the licensing officers indicated how this kind of indicator would complement the current measure because “if [providers] are supposed to go beyond regulations then that should be taken into consideration.” The other licensing officer said that measuring compliance to regulations is “important because if you’re not meeting basic requirements then how can we say you’re running the ideal program”.

A senior manager, licensing officer, two supervisors and a provider suggested revising the licensing inspection checklist used as a guide to measuring compliance. They indicated how reducing the number of administrative conditions examined would devote more time and effort to monitoring process quality characteristics of a program. A supervisor shared her opinion of how the inspection checklist is “administratively heavy and relies on accreditation to compensate”.

A regional manager and two licensing officers felt this type of indicator would not be effective and thought childcare providers would not receive it well. They prefer to work with providers in a consultative manner to meet licensing requirements rather than officially issuing a non-compliance that is publicly reported. The regional manager mentioned how “programs freak out receiving a non-compliance and receiving one doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a bad thing if there’s learning involved”. These three participants felt this type of indicator would not be effective in promoting continuous improvement.

Two providers noted issues with accurately recording non-compliances. One of the providers stated licensing officers “are not doing their job and giving programs every opportunity to correct things” instead of being issued a non-compliance. Another childcare provider mentioned how other providers are not always forthcoming about reporting a critical incident. She felt reporting compliance to regulations is “great but I don’t think it’s an accurate measure. I’ve been honest about submitting critical incidents so I end up getting a non-compliance. I don’t feel others are as honest. You get the wrath. I’m shocked at how many centres don’t report critical incidents. There’s lots of non-compliances not captured. So many executive directors are not honest about reporting.”

When inquiring about their thoughts on process focused performance measures, 10 respondents believed measuring process qualities would help guide progress towards positive child developmental outcomes. These 10 participants included two senior managers, four licensing officers, and four childcare providers. One of the licensing officers felt inspections place too much of a focus on administrative paperwork. This licensing officer continued to explain that she would rather spend the time observing staff and said, “if we’re able to focus on more general interactions that would be huge. We would have to be in the programs a lot more often and longer but examining whether they are doing more developmental things would guarantee better childcare programs out there. Observing interactions and how they build relationships is more important than determining whether there’s a snack available at a certain time. I don’t mind the extra work because I feel it’s more beneficial”. A provider replied that this measure is “really important. If you’re not engaged with the child how do you meet their needs. My staff are expected to interact and acknowledge the child and parents”.

Six participants felt it would be best to eliminate the accreditation program and incorporate those voluntary accreditation standards as mandatory licensing regulations. The six participants included a senior manager, two supervisors, two licensing officers and a provider. A supervisor explained that if licensing inspections were more frequent and unannounced it would allow for a more authentic observation of childcare conditions.

Five respondents noted the importance of identifying the appropriate tool used for measurement for monitoring process variables. These respondents included a senior manager, regional manager, supervisor, licensing officer and a provider. The licensing officer and provider shared their concerns that measuring process characteristics would be subjective and may threaten the validity of results. Two supervisors noted that licensing officers would require additional training to administer these new tools. One of those supervisors mentioned that if observational tools were added to a licensing officer’s responsibilities then we must ensure inter-rater reliability.

DISCUSSION

Structural and process aspects are the defining features of service quality (Helburn & Howes, 1996, p. 64). Structural features can include regulatory requirements that involve adult to child ratios, staff’s education and training, and group sizes (Ceglowski & Davis, 2004, p. 75). Licensing officers monitor childcare providers to ensure they meet regulation standards. Among the performance measures reviewed, this particular measure is conceivably the simplest to implement. Alberta’s Childcare Information System is a central database that stores detailed accounts of non-compliances issued by licensing officers. Reporting on this performance measure would involve a quantitative analysis of documented non-compliances within the database system.

The process aspects of service quality involve interactions within the childcare facility and the application of developmentally appropriate activities. Direct observations measure these interactions and relationships (Ceglowski & Davis, 2004, p. 74). Witnessing the actual work and competencies of the staff is a minor part of licensing inspections. As indicated by the findings, licensing officers interviewed admitted that most of their onsite inspections involve ensuring

proper administrative documentation. They continue to reveal their reliance on accreditation to attend to process focused aspects. Examining the quality of staff and child relations and the design of a program's curriculum is a key responsibility of the Accreditation of Early Learning and Care services (AELCs).

The prevailing notion shared by the participants of this study looked beyond structural qualities relating to the safety and wellbeing of children and parallels the literature's progression towards a more process-oriented approach supporting the child's development. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, & Harvard University (NICHD) (2009) emphasized the importance of relationships between the child and adults who provide cognitively stimulating activities within childcare facilities (p. 2). The NICHD Early Childcare Research Network (2002) examined the relationship of how structural features such as child-staff ratio indirectly influence process features such as caregiver quality that in turn enhances the children's resilience, social and emotional competencies (p. 199). Evidence based research supports the value of monitoring process features as a performance measure. AELCs evaluate process standards as part of its accreditation process. Their results within those specific sub-measures can monitor performance as opposed to the overall determination of whether a childcare provider met accreditation standards.

Participants questioned how AELC assessed accreditation. They were concerned with how providers can game the accreditation process. Frontline staff interviewed noted AELCS' announced inspections are rare. This can allow providers to display a false performance. The findings also made known how accreditation does not apply to all childcare programs. Preschool programs are not included in the accreditation program. A more effective performance measure would involve an encompassing approach that applies to all program types over which the ECD Branch has authority and would involve frequent unannounced inspections.

Measuring process quality would involve a subjective observational assessment. The ECD branch and childcare stakeholders would have to approve of instruments used for measurement. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale are examples of common tools used to evaluate process elements in centre-based care (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sammons, Melhuish, Elliot, & Totsika, 2006, p.78). These rating scales include subscales that assess space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, staff and child interactions, child and child interactions, program structure, and parents and staff interactions. Additional training would be required if licensing officers employed these environment rating scales or similar instruments to properly apply these measures. Another consideration is to ensure inter-rater reliability.

A licensing officer's role can include a more in depth assessment of process quality as part of their inspections of childcare providers. Incorporating this function to an already established regular inspection schedule for all childcare providers can be demanding. The main drawback is the potentially increased workload a licensing officer would assume given the involved nature of observational assessments. This can lead to a compromise that sacrifices monitoring structural aspects for a more manageable workload. A re-examination of licensing officer duties and job expectations may be required with the added responsibilities of performing an involved task.

Licensing officers interviewed believed that shifting their inspections to focus on process elements would provide more meaning to their work. This approach would expand the scope of quality features the ECD branch is able to report for all programs under their jurisdiction.

DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES PERFORMANCE MEASURE

FINDINGS

The next interview question proposed a type of measurement geared towards child development outcomes. The question provided the Early Development Instrument (EDI) as an example of a tool used to measure a child's developmental milestones in key domains. The Government of Alberta has applied the EDI instrument in previous initiatives. It is familiar to the participants of the study.

Eight respondents said using an outcome measure such as the EDI would not be an accurate measure that identifies the effect of the efforts made by the ECD program. These respondents included a senior manager, two regional managers, two supervisors, two licensing officers and a provider. A regional manager, licensing officer, and two providers commented how externalities outside of the childcare field can affect results. A provider disagreed with an outcome performance measure and stated there are "so many different factors that go into a child and their upbringing. Hard to attribute. Parents are splitting and Bobby acts out by beating Fred or a kid bites another because at home he has a new baby sister". A regional manager noted that the EDI is a respectable general population-based measure but it would not be a good measure for childcare.

The remaining seven participants felt that this would be an ideal tool to target areas of need at the community level. These participants included a senior manager, three licensing officers and three providers. The senior manager pointed out that the measure would reflect the work done by parental resource programs that the ECD branch endorses. A licensing officer referred to how programs should apply this measure to better "identify which children are lacking so they can address them". A provider thought it would help "increase awareness for caregivers and families" of where we need to focus our efforts.

Discussion

Assessments of a child's level of development based on expected milestones can influence the provision of high quality services. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) reliably examines a child's readiness to learn at school in a holistic manner (Janus, Harrison, Goldfeld, Guhn, & Brinkman, 2016, p. 2). Results from the EDI validated and supported enhanced early learning opportunities in communities within British Columbia (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2009, pp. 219-220).

The EDI is a school-based survey applied by kindergarten teachers to measure school readiness. It is not childcare specific and administered at a point in a child's life when he or she would no longer be requiring childcare. A participant in this study has argued that EDI scores can signify the effectiveness of the resources and supports the ECD branch sponsors. Most

respondents have argued that those ECD sponsored supports would reflect one of the influencing factors in a child's life. It would also be difficult to establish attribution of a child's developmental scores. Using developmental outcomes is a low-probability program technology susceptible to external influences (McDavid, et al., 2013, p. 345).

An adapted EDI or a similar outcome measure for younger children requires the administrator to be familiar with the child in an early learning setting to develop the child's profile accurately (Early Development Instrument, 2015, para. 2). A childcare provider has this advantage over a licensing officer. Providers would therefore be the ideal administrator of the measure. Placing the responsibility of reporting outcome results to the childcare provider can call its validity into question due to the risk of gaming.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES CONSIDERED BY THE ECD BRANCH

FINDINGS

The ECD branch advocates accessible and affordable childcare and would benefit from indicators designed to monitor progress within those ideals. Participants considered performance measures that address the accessibility and affordability of childcare spaces. Suggested indicators would track the average enrollment capacity for each facility as well as the average cost for each available space.

When asked about how they felt about a performance measure that focuses on accessibility, 11 respondents felt that this measure does not speak to a program's quality attributes. These respondents included two senior managers, three supervisors, four licensing officers and two providers. They believe quality of childcare is the most important consideration overlooked with this measure. A senior manager "would want to look at access but it has to be in concert with the quality piece". Four licensing officers, a supervisor and a provider also remarked that creating more spaces is not an issue. This sub-category of six respondents thought parents who can afford to do so are willing to place their child on a waitlist for a recognized childcare program rather than enrol their child in an unfamiliar nearby facility that has available spaces. One supervisor commented on how some programs benefit from name recognition and how an affiliation with a well-known company allows them to charge more. A regional manager felt that it "does not speak for outcomes of children". Another supervisor felt that tracking available spaces is not effective or useful because "the better ones are always full and the bad ones are always empty."

Five participants comprising of two regional managers, a licensing officer and two providers identified the government's limitations regarding the accessibility of childcare. Due to external influences outside of government's control, they do not think this would be a good performance measure for the ECD branch to employ. A regional manager commented how "we don't have control over this". The licensing officer mentioned that the availability of spaces "can go up and down with the economy. It can't be tied to our performance....may not be helpful. So many more external factors that can affect the result".

When asked about their thoughts on a performance measure on the affordability of childcare, eight respondents talked about how this would be a good indicator to determine the equilibrium point of what a parent is willing to pay and what a program can charge. These respondents included two senior managers, a regional manager, two supervisors, two licensing officers and a provider. A licensing officer and supervisor said this type of measure would be a way to reveal the needs of different community areas. The regional manager noted that a higher price might lead to a shift from regulated to private babysitting arrangements.

Three respondents felt government has very little influence on a program's affordability and do not feel it would be a good measure. A regional manager, supervisor and licensing officer said that a program fee increase inevitably follows a government subsidy increase. They felt that this lessens the subsidy's impact on affordability. The licensing officer noted, "For every penny that the government relieves off a parent, the program takes it back".

DISCUSSION

The ECD branch promotes the accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare services (Alberta Human Services, 2016a, p. 73). Previous sections addressed performance measures on quality. This section will respond to the measurement of the accessibility and affordability of childcare. This is an important issue addressed by Alberta's commitment to help children reach their full potential and support working mothers (Alberta Human Services, 2014, p. 15-16). These performance measures would monitor the supply of open spaces and the financial burden placed on parents.

Accessibility, affordability and quality characteristics are interrelated in a program's design. A high functioning provider offering quality childcare would have well-trained and well-paid staff with low staff turnover (Klinkner, Riley, & Roach, 2005, p. 90). These attributes are an attractive feature for parents. Sustaining that high level of quality is a costly venture with expense reflected on the escalating fees charged to parents. Helburn and Howes (1996) found "wages for better-qualified staff members are expected to be higher than wages for less-qualified staff members, and higher wages will drive upward the costs of providing childcare and the fees charged for services" (p. 63).

The ECD's role in affecting childcare supply and cost is limited. There are no government run facilities and no regulations to restrain parental fees. The ECD program can only incentivize space creation or provide subsidies to parents as a way to support accessibility and affordability. Despite the provision of operational grants to encourage opening new spaces, childcare providers must contend with employing the required number of staff to meet licensing ratio requirements for those spaces. A supervisor interviewed also disagreed with operational grants because of how they make providers reliant on government funding to sustain themselves. A regional manager noted in her interview the challenge of tracking availability through waitlists and enrolment. Capacity pressures can fluctuate more at the community level where this measure would be of more use to identify areas of need as opposed to reporting an aggregate result at the provincial level.

In response to the ECD branch's attempt to make childcare affordable, participant interviews of frontline staff revealed that providers are inclined to raise fees in concert with increased subsidies. The desired effect to make childcare affordable would not be achieved. This could also have the unintended consequence of raising the cost of childcare beyond the budget of middle-income earners who do not qualify for government subsidies.

Performance measures that monitor the accessibility and affordability of childcare can provide a broad awareness of the demand for childcare. Exploring factors that drive that demand would better address issues of accessibility. Interview findings from the ECD staff consistently pointed to how these measures are missing the quality aspect. Supervisors' feedback indicated that spaces are available but parents choose not to use them because of their poor reputation.

In a capitalist market economy, the high demand for childcare should encourage more choices and competitive fees. Instead, the absence of government intervention can result in a market failure. Australia's shift to privatization was followed by the consequent collapse of the ABC Learning Centres Limited that subsequently necessitated a government bailout (Brennan, & Oloman, 2009, pp.117-118). With no direct government controls on childcare spaces and fees, these performance measures may not be effective and can serve to highlight the government's limitations.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

FINDINGS

The final question in the interview guide attempted to capture other performance measures or considerations not addressed in previous questions. Participants shared their personal thoughts on what the ECD branch should report publicly. This section of the interview relied on the participants' knowledge and experience to expose areas in the childcare system that they feel are lacking. A publicly reported performance measure would provide a spotlight to encourage further improvements in the proposed areas.

Thirteen participants suggested a performance measure should monitor staff's ongoing training in Early Childhood Development. Except for a senior manager and a supervisor, all other respondents reflected this theme in their responses. They felt that better training would directly affect the quality of childcare services. Two supervisors and a licencing officer suggested formalizing education and training standards as part of a mandatory curriculum and embedded in the childcare regulations. A licensing officer commented that when provider staff receive certification, they "should continually update themselves to keep their standing and professional credentials. As things change and research reveals new things, it should be applied." As a sub-category to this theme, a regional manager and supervisor also proposed a performance measure that monitors how a licensing officer engages with a provider. These two respondents said they would like to see how consultations provided by licensing officers improve a provider's practices.

DISCUSSION

A comprehensive review of potential ECD performance measures would go beyond what is cultivated from literature reviews and jurisdictional scan by including the thoughts and experiences of the participants involved in the study. Participants indicated how a caregiver's ongoing relevant training and education is an essential ingredient to advance a child's developmental outcomes. Respondents of the study stressed the importance of staying current with the research on early childhood development and the application innovative practices. The majority of participants agreed to the need to raise standards for qualified childcare staff.

Public investment in early childhood education from the federal to provincial government has been growing (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012, p. 23). To ensure accountability for funds received, it would be important to determine whether the opportunities provided for an educated workforce result in positive outcomes for children. Research shows that caregivers with formal education in early childhood development coupled with specialized training are more inclined to provide higher levels of quality care (Howes, Whitebook, & Phillips, 1992, p. 413). Ongoing professional development to enhance a caregiver's skillset would impact a child's school readiness (Guskey, 2000, p.16).

Currently in Alberta, all staff working in a licensed childcare program must have a child development assistant, child development worker, or child development supervisor certification (Alberta Human Services, 2016b). Each level involves meeting progressive course or practicum criteria. A proposed performance measure would monitor a staff member's progression through these ranks or the number of staff within each of the categories. This can indicate the level of expertise of Alberta's childcare workforce. The assumption would mean a higher certification would translate to better nurturing and engagement towards children. Revising requirements within these certification categories is needed to reflect relevant and leading early childhood developmental practices aligns with the shared vision of ECD staff interviewed.

A variety of backgrounds can qualify within each certification level due to the acceptance of equivalencies in education, training, and informal life experiences (Alberta Human Services, 2015b, p. 6-9). This was an issue raised during the interviews. Respondents felt equivalency requirements should be stricter as this would influence the relevancy, reliability and consistency of caregiver service delivery. An assessment of staff performance would hold staff accountable to how they implement the pertinent elements of their varied backgrounds towards childcare. Observations, self-evaluations or the use of rating scales would monitor interactions between staff and children (Isore, 2009, p. 13).

SUMMARY

The findings indicate that childcare providers interviewed are in favour of maintaining the current accreditation performance measure. Although most of the ECD staff's feedback was criticism of that measure's perceived expectations. The prevailing concern brought forth is how achieving accreditation status, which is a standard set above licensing requirements, does not necessarily

mean those basic licensing requirements have been satisfied. Licensing officers noted that licensing and accreditation are distinctly separate operations that could benefit from the collaboration to improve the measure's value. Accreditation signifies a higher level of quality programming designed to enhance positive child outcomes. This intent is what the providers who participated in the study are attempting to achieve. As for the collective perspective of the ECD staff interviewed, they would like to ensure providers undergo a more comprehensive assessment to justify that reputation and reflect an accurate performance measure.

The developmental outcome measure along with the accessibility and affordability measures were not widely accepted by the study's participants. The shared explanation given is the ECD branch's lack of control to affect the results of the suggested measures. There are concerns that it would not be a valid reflection of the branch's performance. The ECD branch can only incentivize the availability of childcare spaces or provide subsidies to low income families. It cannot actively create spaces or limit how much a provider charges parents. With regard to developmental outcomes, providers and ECD staff interviewed acknowledged the diverse range of factors that contribute towards a child's well-being that goes beyond the purview of the ECD branch. The literature has shown the difficulties of attributing the success or failure of social based programs due to the complexity of extraneous influences.

Participants agreed with the addition of structural and process measures that involve monitoring compliance to regulations and observational assessments of interactions and activities. These proposed measures align with what accreditation is attempting to achieve. They would also capture all whether or not providers are participating in accreditation. The literature points to the importance of how process qualities develop a child's resilience and success as they approach school age. Respondent feedback noted the importance of selecting the proper instrument to employ to measure process elements. Respondents also considered whether licensing officers have the capacity to incorporate that added responsibility in their workload.

The majority of participants indicate that well-educated staff engaged in leading practices is the key factor that establishes a quality childcare provider. Both the ECD staff and childcare providers expressed interest in developing a measure that monitors staff's level of education and whether they are applying the relevant training received. Research has indicated staff's knowledge in early childhood development builds capacity in their role to meet the needs of children and promotes opportunities for children to reach their full potential.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study aimed to explore additional performance measures the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Branch can use to encourage positive outcomes for children in care. The four recommendations presented below intend to support better decision making and uphold the ECD branch's accountability. The recommendations consider study participants' input and takes into account the literature and relevant jurisdictional review. Based on the interviews conducted and feedback received, the focus of these recommendations is to elevate the quality of childcare provided by agencies in Alberta.

The implementation of new performance measures would need to make allowances for their intrusiveness and required resources. The ease of implementation dictates the order of proposed recommendations. The first two indicators are the least intrusive and most cost effective alternatives to action. The last two indicators are more complex to realize and would involve significant changes to the regulation. Narrative findings guide the suggested modifications to policy and procedures. All indicators report annual results within a fiscal year period.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Indicator: Percent of regulation compliant childcare providers

This measure addresses the need to disclose providers' compliance with regulations. It builds upon existing practices and acts upon information currently collected. Aggregate data on compliant providers serve as a new measure for public consumption. The data will also be analyzed at the granular level and provide details of specific providers. Providing this information to the external agency responsible for accreditation adds a level of scrutiny in its process. Specific steps to execute this recommendation are:

- Change all inspections from announced to unannounced except for initial inspections
- Access the Child Care Information System database to extract profiles of childcare providers
- Assess the proportion of childcare providers that have not been issued a non-compliance during the fiscal year
- Report result to the Ministry of Human Services' Annual Business Plan
- Conduct a trends analysis of non-compliances issued to reveal patterns that providers and/or front line staff could address
- Engage the external accreditation agency to adopt the analysis of non-compliance trends produced by the ECD branch in their accreditation assessment
- Update policy to deny or revoke accreditation status based on the provider's history of non-compliances
- Recover accreditation grants provided

RECOMMENDATION 2

Indicator: Percent of childcare providers that meet process quality standards

This measure highlights the process quality aspects of childcare and aligns with the research on positive child development. Depending on the childcare service provided, licensing officers would apply the appropriate program specific environmental rating scale as follows:

- The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool to preschools
- The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale to programs with infants and toddlers
- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale for to children who are two to five years old

Results of these measures would provide the process element missing from regular licensing inspections. Implementing this recommendation will require the following:

- Train licensing officers in the administration of process quality assessments
- Incorporate into a licensing officer's inspection duties related to the application of the validated tools
- Apply the tools to a representative sample of childcare providers within a licensing officer's caseload to mitigate workload pressures
- Review process quality within the childcare regulations and policy to support frontline staff

RECOMMENDATION 3

Indicator: Percent of childcare staff employed at each certification level

This recommendation involves building the caregiver's capacity. The most common feedback from this study points to the lack of expertise amongst childcare staff. Remediating this concern would require an update of the certification requirements. This indicator would serve to monitor the caregiver's professional designation and ongoing training. Adding value to this measure would involve the following:

- Revise equivalencies from the childcare certification criteria
- Professionalize childcare practitioner qualifications with degrees in early childhood studies
- Engage providers to undertake staff self-assessments and raise awareness of whether their performance aligns with their level of training
- Stipulate ongoing professional training and application of theoretical knowledge as a requirement to maintain a staff's current certification level.
- Ensure ongoing training by expanding staff development grants

RECOMMENDATION 4

Indicator: Percent of childcare providers that meet regulatory structural and process standards

This recommendation would transform the accreditation program to align with the process and structural quality standards outlined in previous recommendations. An integrated service delivery model would be implemented that would involve collaboration of services between the accreditation and licencing program. The intent is to raise the quality benchmark across all childcare programs by including licencing requirements in the accreditation process. To fulfill this recommendation, the ECD branch would need to:

- Implement the first three recommendations for enhanced structural and process quality reporting
- Provide the accreditation program access to current and historical non-compliance data on providers seeking accreditation
- Include consultations with licencing officers as part of the assessment process to be accredited
- Monitor a provider's non-compliance trends as a condition for the release of accredited funds

8.0 CONCLUSION

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) branch has the opportunity to do beneficial things for Alberta's children. To achieve this objective, recommended performance measures intend to support positive child development outcomes, promote continuous improvement and ensure government's accountability. Contributing to the measures' design involved a review of the literature on evidence based leading practices as well as an environmental scan of the approach used by other jurisdictions. Grounding the theoretical application of the reviews conducted involved interviewing a purposive sample of Alberta's ECD staff and childcare providers. The knowledge and experience provided by the study's participants moulded the measures to fit the Alberta context and current childcare system.

The overarching theme garnered from the research identifies quality as the subject matter focus for the performance measures. This study considers the multiple approaches to measuring quality as well as the multiple and integrated factors that influence it. From a practical perspective, recommendations reflect the feasibility of successful implementation and bears in mind resource constraints and political demands. A supplemental indicator that measures compliance to regulations addresses concerns participants conveyed with the current measure. Other proposed indicators aim to develop the process quality aspects of childcare delivery. These indicators relate to capacity building and adopt the participants' shared vision for improvements to the system.

The underlying challenge of designing meaningful performance measures for socially based programs is attributing efforts made by those programs to the observed outcomes. A wide array of external influences in a child's immediate environment shapes their development. This can make it difficult to credit a noticeable effect on any one initiative. To mitigate this limitation, the indicators monitor the direct outputs the ECD branch has influence over. It is a small step in helping to understand the bigger picture of whether the ECD is supporting positive child developmental outcomes. Participant feedback provided rich insight from well-respected specialists in the childcare field that takes into account perspectives from a corporate standpoint, front line enforcement and childcare delivery. Further research could entail expanding the research derived from the small purposive sample towards determining the perspectives of a more representative population that includes a wider range of ECD stakeholders.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Guide

Current State

- What are your impressions of the current accreditation performance measure?
- How meaningful is it to the work conducted by the Early Childhood Development Branch?

Service Quality

- How do you feel about measuring structural quality with regard to adherence to regulations (staff-child ratios, health and safety regulations, staff credentials)?
- How do you feel about measuring the process quality with regard to how the child is engaged in the program?

Developmental Outcomes

- How do you feel about measuring child developmental outcomes such as using the Early Development Instrument?

Early Childhood Development Branch Considerations

- How do you feel about measures that focus on accessibility?
- How do you feel about measures that focus on affordability?

Other suggestions

- Can you suggest other indicators or areas to consider that would be worth pursuing?