

Managing the Impacts of Full-Day Kindergarten on Rural Child Care Centres in Ontario

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Evidence suggests that the introduction of full-day kindergarten (FDK) in Ontario poses challenges to the child care sector; however, there is a dearth of information on the unique struggles faced by the rural child care sector as a result of the implementation of FDK. Furthermore, little is known about survival strategies adopted by rural child care centres. Telephone interviews with seven consolidated municipal service managers (CMSMs), who are responsible for service planning and support, revealed the actions taken to aid rural communities. Telephone interviews with nine rural child care centre directors/operators highlighted their strategies for managing the challenges presented by FDK and revealed the most pressing problems facing the rural child care sector.

Keywords: rural child care; full-day kindergarten challenges; child care policies; consolidated service managers

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Background

Early learning and child care (ELCC) is defined as a coherent, integrated, and inclusive approach to services delivered to children and parents (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). A high-quality ELCC program is appropriately designed both to include

care and early learning that prepares children to succeed at school and to provide social support for parents by facilitating parental participation in the job market or pursuit of education (Friendly, 2011; Friendly & Prentice, 2009; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011). Although quality in ELCC is most often focused on structural issues, such as staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications, it has been argued that quality encompasses other equally important matters, such as funding, governance, policies that support ELCC programs, and evaluation (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). Beneficial or negative aspects of family policies, including the provision of affordable, high-quality ELCC services, have consequences for children and families, because these policies will extend to other aspects of a child's life, such as family functioning. Child care services in Canada have been called a "patchwork" of services due to the fragmentation of child care policies across provinces and territories (Cleveland, 2008). Provincial jurisdictions have "exclusive authority" over child care policies, and each provincial government holds different views about the state of ELCC, thereby creating variation across provinces (Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Pasolli & Young, 2012). An example of these variations is the enormous differences in child care fees for infants across provinces, from \$174 a month in Quebec City, to \$1,736 a month in Toronto (Macdonald & Klinger, 2015).

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has the responsibility for issuing licences to child care operators and for enforcing the Child Care and Early Years Act (Government of Ontario, 2016). Furthermore, the provincial government funds, licenses, and develops policy to support licensed child care, while consolidated municipal service managers (CMSMs) and district social service

administration boards (DSSABs) plan and manage child care services at the local level (Government of Ontario, 2016). Funds provided by the government are mostly used to provide subsidies to low-income families and for wage subsidies; however, parent fees account for the majority of centre revenues, and can be very expensive for middle-income families, especially those requiring care for an infant/toddler or for two or more children below school age (Friendly, 2011; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007).

Full-day kindergarten in Ontario

The Ontario government envisioned a plan for early learning in Ontario and announced it in 2009 in the Pascal report, *With Our Best Futures in Mind*. The provincial government's plan included school-board-operated full-day kindergarten (FDK) programs with extended day programs. FDK was introduced in 2010 with plans for full implementation by 2014 (Pascal, 2009). The introduction of FDK to Ontario for 4- and 5-year-olds was termed the "biggest transformation" in the province's education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). The introduction of FDK in Ontario has generally been seen as a positive step. The program, under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, is delivered by local school boards and aims to provide 4- and 5-year-olds with an integrated day of learning, including before and after school care, operated on school premises (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). The resource guide *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) builds on the expectations and pedagogical approaches to learning in FDK settings.

FDK intends to give 4- and 5-year-olds positive learning experiences through a planned curriculum and a play-based program that recognizes play as a means of a child's expression of curiosity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). FDK is intended to allow for universal access to ELCC for all 4- and 5-year-olds throughout the province. Arguments on the fulfilled expectations, or lack thereof, of FDK are outside the scope of this study. Our research focuses on the effects of FDK implementation on the child care sector as a result of moving older preschool children out of community child care programs without sufficient planning for system change and additional investments in child care services. We argue that doing so puts unsustainable pressure on the child care sector and creates uncertainty for the parents who rely on child care services (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2012) and that such impacts are particularly consequential for children, programs, and communities in rural areas.

Impact of FDK policy on child care policy and quality

FDK implementation can impact the affordability of child care. While parents benefit from access to "free" ELCC in local schools for 4- and 5-year-olds (at least during the school year), the costs for parents of younger children are affected negatively. Specifically, the age mix in child care programs when service is provided for infants to 5-year-olds enhances affordability by having the cost of care for 4- and 5-year-olds offset that of younger, more vulnerable children, who are more expensive to care for. With 4- and 5-year-olds transferring to the FDK program, child care operators must redesign their service model and spaces to provide services exclusively to younger children (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2012), for whom more staff are required to meet adult:child ratios and provide quality care. An immediate consequence of this change is an increase in child care fees, which makes child care more expensive and less accessible to parents of children under 4 (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2012). Furthermore, the shift of 4- and 5-year-olds to FDK programs results in vacant spaces in child care programs, which decreases the programs' viability and potential to receive funding. The government of Ontario did provide some financial assistance to child care centres and to schools as communities implemented the full-day early learning kindergarten program; however, recent Ontario funding guidelines prioritize funding to viable child care programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). Compared to urban areas, rural communities already faced existing issues in child care, such as limited licensed child care spaces and decreased enrollments (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2011).

Valued and compensated early childhood educators (ECEs) are key to maintaining the quality of the child care sector. The implementation of FDK puts schools in direct competition with the child care sector for qualified ECEs, thereby creating additional recruitment and retention issues in the child care sector. Child care operators also face a significant increase in their work load, such as overseeing capital retrofits, developing business plans, applying for grants, and negotiating licensing processes and agreements with school boards, particularly if they wish to operate third-party before- and after-school programs (City of Toronto, 2013). It has been noted that FDK only magnifies the challenges that previously existed in the child care sector, particularly in rural communities, potentially resulting in fewer licensed child care services (Friendly, 2011).

Characteristics of rural communities

An abundance of research has shown that designing and implementing an initiative in rural areas presents different challenges than

would be encountered in urban areas (Asthana & Halliday, 2004; Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). It is important to appreciate the characteristics of rural communities, because it aids in understanding why certain policies that work in urban areas are not sustainable in rural communities. The Rural Ontario Municipal Association (2011) asserts that the characteristically low population density in rural areas translates into an inadequate number of individuals available to sustain businesses. The lack of businesses also impedes the development of job opportunities. Furthermore, the lack of workers increases the cost of providing certain public services, such as transportation, water, and waste removal and treatment. A scattered population where services are utilized by few users further implies that it would be more expensive to provide infrastructure and public services to such communities, because the services might not be utilized to their utmost potential (Doherty, 1994; Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). Similarly, Asthana and Halliday (2004) report that the costs of operating services are higher in rural areas. One of the many contributors to these higher costs is the lack of accessible services, which translates into service providers incurring high travel costs. Transportation costs are also incurred by users of services, and it is particularly problematic for low-income individuals/families and for groups such as the elderly and individuals with physical disabilities. Asthana and Halliday (2004) also observe a relationship between rural location and service quality. They report that services provided for rural dwellers are often limited, and the services provided are not up to par with services provided in urban areas. Furthermore, the predominant work pattern in many rural areas is seasonal; individuals may work for long hours in certain months and have shorter or no work hours in other months. The seasonal cycle results in unique requirements for programs and services such as child care. Child care services that respond to such working patterns are necessary; however, they are lacking in most rural areas (Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). With these characteristics in mind, the need for social supports cannot be overstated.

Challenges facing child care centres in rural communities

Even before the implementation of FDK, the child care sector in rural Ontario has always faced challenges due to its unique characteristics (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2011). Such characteristics as seasonal variation in work patterns, variation in child care needs, commuting long distances for work, and sparsely populated areas require child care services that offer seasonal care and emergency or periodic care, as well as care for extended hours. Rural child care centres experience major challenges, including unoccupied spaces, limited funding, and staffing difficulties. There are fewer users of services due to the declining population in rural communities; however, this does not dismiss the needs of families who require those services. Because the majority of funding for child care centres comes from parent fees, it is important that spaces are filled for centres to remain viable (Doherty, 1994). As the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) explained, “the problem isn’t always the lack of child care spaces. Sometimes, it’s the inability to fill all the spaces that affects the providers’ ability to stay open” (2011, p. 3). Furthermore, having fewer children in a child care centre precludes hiring the required number of staff to operate age-segregated groups (infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children). For this reason, child care supervisors in rural centres are likely to spend more time filling in for the lack of staff, thereby overlooking their administrative and leadership responsibilities (Atkinson Centre, 2011; Doherty, 1994).

Furthermore, rural child care services face funding challenges. Centres cannot rely solely on parent fees to operate. They require stable operational funding to sustain their services; however, OMSSA (2011) reports that as the enrollment population declined in the child care sector, funding did the same. Many reports have shown that child care centres in rural areas tend to lack spaces for infants and toddlers because they are considered expensive to care for (Atkinson Centre, 2011; Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2011; Prentice, 2007). Additionally, rural communities find it difficult to attract and retain appropriately trained staff (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2011). This is because most qualified staff desire salaries that are commensurate with urban child care centres; however, pay scales in rural centres are generally lower. The lack of qualified staff raises concern about the quality of care provided, because centres may be forced to employ underqualified workers (Atkinson Centre, 2011; Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2011).

Although the general challenges faced by child care centres in rural communities have been acknowledged, there is a dearth of information on the unique challenges they have faced due to the implementation of FDK. Additionally, little is known about survival strategies adopted by rural child care centres. This study was designed to learn about how FDK implementation is affecting rural child care programs and what strategies providers and local CMSMs are using to adapt to system change. It incorporates information obtained from both CMSM staff and child care program directors/operators, and it provides an initial analysis of the circumstances that may reduce or exacerbate the difficulties rural child care programs may be experiencing. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To understand the level of involvement of CMSMs in supporting rural ELCC services.

2. To learn how rural child care operators have been affected by the introduction of FDK and/or how they expect to be affected in the near future.
3. To examine what characterizes situations in which child care centre directors/operators are able to make positive changes to buffer negative effects, and what characterizes situations where centres appear to be more vulnerable.

Human ecology perspective on rural child care

This research employs a human ecology framework that situates the realities of individual lives in the contexts in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework has three main premises. The first is that individuals are not isolated, but interact with their physical and social contexts. Individuals are actively interacting with the contexts or environments in which they live (Keating, 2008). For the purposes of this research, it is important to situate child care as a phenomenon in a rural context and to understand the experiences of child care operators and the daily challenges they face when providing child care in rural areas. The second premise of the human ecology framework is that environments have boundaries that are permeable, thereby allowing interactions and influences from other environments (Keating, 2008). In the context of this research, characteristics of rural communities, such as sparse populations and the challenges of travelling to where services are located, may affect the availability and accessibility of services and service delivery (Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2011). In this way, the physical environment influences existing programs, and for child care operators, maintaining the viability of their business becomes an issue when it is not easily accessible to the entire community. The third premise of the human ecology framework is that individuals are not “passive recipients of their environments” (Keating, 2008). Individuals have varying capacities to adapt to their environments. In the context of this research, it is imperative to understand adaptive strategies of operators as they combat the many challenges presented by the introduction of FDK. This research seeks to understand if or how rural child care operators are taking advantage of financial or human resources to adapt to changes. It is important to note that the environment of focus includes both the immediate and macro environments, such as policies enacted by the provincial government.

Methodology

This study takes an exploratory approach to research. Reiter (2013) explains that in exploratory research, a researcher sets out with a purpose in mind, with a phenomenon to study or investigate. This phenomenon is usually not clearly understood. The researcher therefore uses their imagination, insights, and experience to propose new ways of understanding the phenomenon. This study sought to gain new insights and understanding of the strategies employed by directors/operators of rural child care services and local CMSMs for overcoming the challenges of full-day kindergarten. It was important to gain information from the CMSMs because, under the Childcare and Early Years Act, they deliver financial assistance to and coordinate planning and operation of child care centres. They also help struggling centres maintain viability and effect policy change in the child care centres. The study therefore inferred that CMSMs would/should be aware of the needs of the rural child care sector as it adapts to FDK implementation. Similarly, under the Act, child care centre directors/operators are involved in daily administration and management of centres. This study aimed to understand how centre directors/operators were adapting their programs to mitigate the pressures presented by FDK implementation. Ultimately, this study aimed to juxtapose the perspectives of both groups.

Participant sampling and recruitment

The research included 16 participants, seven of whom were CMSMs of regional or county child care services departments in southwestern Ontario and nine of whom were directors/operators of child care centres in rural communities. Centres included both nonprofit and private, for-profit child care centres. Sampling involved a purposive sample of CMSMs from seven counties in southwestern Ontario. The director of Childcare Services for Guelph and Wellington County and a senior child care policy analyst facilitated this research by sending out letters of invitation to CMSMs on behalf of the researchers. Eight CMSMs were contacted initially and seven agreed to participate. Subsequent correspondence was carried out between the researchers and the CMSMs. CMSM participants also facilitated contact with directors/operators of rural child care centres in their areas by sending out invitation letters describing the study on behalf of the researchers. Eleven centre directors/operators were contacted initially, but only nine agreed to participate. Informed consent was obtained through a written consent form that was signed and returned by all participants prior to interviews. The researchers conducted telephone interviews with the participants. Participants dialled into a conference call using a toll-free number. The telephone interviews involved a one-time call scheduled to last for 45 minutes. Each interview included the researchers and the participant.

The format used for interviewing CMSMs and centre directors/operators was a semistructured interview, which allowed the researchers to obtain descriptive information and establish rapport prior to moving to more open-ended questions. This process allowed participants to speak freely. It also allowed the researchers to probe for details and clarifications in a natural way. All interviews were digitally recorded, after permission to do so was granted. Following the interviews, each centre director was sent a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for their involvement in the research.

Data analysis

The interviews from both CMSMs and centre directors/operators resulted in about 30 pages of transcribed notes. Extensive notes were also taken for all 16 participants by the researchers during the interviews. Thematic analysis was selected as the method of data analysis for this study, following the procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). A theme is part of the data that captures important information in relation to the research question. It is usually a patterned response throughout the data set. The intent in this study was to give a sense of the predominant themes that emerged from a rich description of the entire data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is inductive. In this study, the themes that were generated were directly linked to the data, and there was no preexisting framework.

Coding was performed manually because the data set was of a manageable size. Codes, as defined by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012), are the most basic information about the phenomenon that can be accessed meaningfully. Pages of text were reviewed in a recursive manner. Results were organized and reported separately for CMSMs and centre directors/operators. Five subthemes were initially generated from CMSMs' responses and further developed to two main themes: awareness of CMSMs, and actions of CMSMs. Similarly, four subthemes and two main themes were generated from centre directors/operators' responses. The two main themes were challenges and strategies. This paper organizes the findings as they relate to the study objectives.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness, or validity of a study, is the truthfulness of "findings and conclusions based on the maximum opportunity to hear participant voices in a particular context" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 192). To achieve credibility, the researchers used triangulation. One form of triangulation involves using a range of informants (Shenton, 2004). To understand rural child care, this study gathered information from both CMSMs and child care centre directors/operators. Participants were encouraged to freely share their opinions from the beginning of the study. To encourage honest, genuine, and willing participation, participants were granted an unconditional right to withdraw at any point. This approach is consistent with Shenton's (2004) suggestions for establishing credibility.

This study is not without its limitations, most of which relate to the scope and sample size. The scope of the study was limited to the experiences of rural centre directors/operators and CMSMs from southwestern Ontario who were able to participate. Selection biases are likely, and we do not assume that the findings represent the experiences of all CMSMs or rural centre directors/operators in this region or other rural Ontario regions. Further research could examine how these and other centre directors/operators are affected over time as FDK is fully implemented and as more attention is paid to funding and support issues for licensed child care providers. It would also be valuable to learn more about centres that close as a result of FDK, as well as centres that become more proactive in serving the needs of the children and families in their community.

Findings

Pressing problems in rural child care centres

The unique characteristics of rural areas present challenges to the licensed child care sector. Initially, the interview questions aimed to achieve a general overview of the problems facing rural child care centres that were not necessarily tied to the implementation of FDK. In fact, when asked to identify what they perceived to be the most pressing problems facing their child care centres, directors/operators referred to some problems that were directly related to the introduction of FDK, as well as issues that were more general. Centre directors/operators acknowledged the impact of FDK on their child care programs, and impacts were also anticipated in areas where kindergarten had not yet been implemented. Directors/operators reported a mix of positive and negative impacts, although themes of negative impacts were more common. Child care directors/operators felt that funding was a main area of concern for their centres. Several centre directors/operators commented on the limited funding available to them. Some opined that even when funding was available, it was tough to access because public schools were given funding priority.

Additionally, several directors/operators reported drops in enrollments as one of the many issues plaguing their centres. Over the past year, many directors/operators had experienced fluctuations in the enrollment patterns of all age groups. For example, some centres had more unfilled spaces than they had in the previous year. For many directors/operators, more recent decreases in enrollments occurred within the kindergarten age group (4- and 5-year-olds). Reductions in enrollment are closely linked to a program's financial viability. Centre directors/operators contended that the change in the number and ages of children had resulted in a less financially viable situation for them. Similarly, child care directors/operators mentioned that the cost of child care itself is expensive and that this expense could be discouraging parents from enrolling their children. Directors/operators also perceived that parents were unaware of the availability of subsidies. Furthermore, as a result of FDK, centre directors/operators reported room closures or impending room closures, such as infant or toddler rooms, in their centres. Some directors/operators were considering renovating their centres to avoid room closures; however, structural issues presented a barrier for those directors/operators who would have liked to revamp their building to suit the needs of younger age groups.

The introduction of FDK has had an impact on the already existing issues of recruiting and retaining qualified ECEs in rural areas. For all of the directors/operators, attracting and retaining qualified staff was an immense concern. Attracting staff to a rural area is challenging, but retaining them is even more difficult. Unlike the school boards, child care centres do not offer competitive wages to ECEs. Additionally, most centres do not offer nonwage benefits to ECEs, making it easier to lose staff to jobs with more competitive wages and benefits.

One director observed a decrease in staff morale and higher rates of absenteeism among staff. Centre directors/operators reported making necessary changes in their staffing patterns. They stated that staff retention became contingent on the enrollment patterns of different age groups; some planned on laying off staff of age groups where enrollments were low. For several directors, recruiting qualified ECEs was problematic. For example, directors/operators reported receiving more job applications from unqualified individuals than from qualified ECEs. One director mentioned: "Incredible challenges. We receive a lot of applications from people with passion, but no licence. When we post job advertisements, it is difficult to get a decent number of qualified staff" (Director 8). With the introduction of FDK, licensed nonprofit child care centres can be granted contracts to provide before- and after-school programs on behalf of the school boards. Several directors/operators reported being awarded the contract to offer before- and after-school programs in their area. However, they were concerned that recruiting staff to work split shifts might deter from program success.

Strategies used by rural child care directors/operators

All the directors/operators affirmed that it was essential to maintain their child care centres' viability in the face of the challenges presented by FDK. Each director disclosed the strategies they had used or were expecting to use to maintain centre viability. While some were further along or had adapted unique strategies, many directors/operators were responding in similar ways, with the majority focusing on promoting enrollments and trying to stimulate demand through strategic marketing, repositioning themselves to attract younger children, or taking advantage of the opportunity to offer before- and after-school or extended day programming in partnership with their local board.

A dominant theme among centre directors/operators was their use of strategic marketing to promote their centre. Some directors/operators recruited board members who had marketing backgrounds, and their skills were utilized in promoting the centre. Directors/operators used various media to promote their centres. These included community newsletters and websites. In their advertising, many of the directors/operators aimed at attracting parents who already patronized unlicensed child care programs by emphasizing the benefits of licensed child care programs. Furthermore, in response to financial strains caused by the introduction of FDK, most directors/operators commented on the importance of having business savvy. Some enhanced their managerial skills by enrolling in business courses or workshops aimed at teaching them business resilience and continuity. Several directors/operators felt that, as a result of these training sessions, they were in a better position to plan and adjust to any business issues.

In response to losing the older children to the public school system, many directors/operators reported reorienting their rooms and centres to accommodate younger age groups. Also, some were upgrading their toys and materials to be more age appropriate for younger children. One director's comment described the changes: "The implementation pulled two years' worth of development age of our children. We have had to relook and revamp our toys to get age-appropriate toys [for the younger children]" (Director 7). However, some directors/operators were unable to make structural changes in their centres due to funding issues. Directors/operators mentioned that, without formal commitment from CMSMs and the provincial government, it would be difficult to maintain the viability of programs aimed at younger age groups. Similarly, one director mentioned increasing parent fees as a strategy for

sustaining centre viability. A more common theme among directors/operators was offering parents more flexibility in their child care routines. This strategy improved customer service and helped retain the loyalty of parents. One director gave an example: “[We offer] more flexible child care now . . . parents have the option of terminating their child care and holding their spot for when they come back. We cater to the needs of each family” (Director 9).

Directors/operators were also taking action to address staffing challenges through various strategies to retain their staff. Specific initiatives included increasing staff wages, offering benefits to staff, promoting the early childhood education field, and offering staff appreciation activities or awards. Several directors/operators reported responding to the dire state of ECE wages in the rural child care sector. They described plans to increase staff wages or to offer some monetary incentive to staff working in rural areas. One director mentioned receiving wage improvement allocations for their staff from their municipal government for this purpose. In addition, several centre directors/operators commented that they were beginning to offer some form of benefits to their staff. Some already had a registered retirement savings plan in effect for their staff, while others were considering it. Furthermore, directors attributed the shortage of qualified staff to the low enrollments in ECE programs. Some directors/operators took it upon themselves to create awareness about the field and to encourage individuals from the community to pursue a career in the field. Several directors/operators commended their staff; many stated that they had “great staff.” Directors/operators showed commitment to enhancing staff morale through various means, such as celebrating staff accomplishments, being flexible and accommodating staff, rewarding above-average performance with “employee of the month” awards, and treating staff to meals. Directors/operators acknowledged the payoff from these inputs.

Rural considerations by CMSMs

Several CMSMs reported that they had tailored implementation plans specific to rural communities. They also mentioned that they were taking actions to aid rural communities. These plans had manifested in different ways, such as funding considerations, soliciting the voices of rural child care operators in the planning phase, and lobbying on behalf of rural child care centres for extended day programs.

According to most CMSMs, some form of financial consideration was made specifically to rural areas. Most CMSMs had taken steps toward addressing the financial viability of child care centres. Some assisted rural child care operators with financial planning. Some CMSMs acknowledged the unique service delivery issues for child care programs in rural communities and had therefore provided supplemental funding to rural areas. Several CMSMs commented on this. For example, one said: “We have allocated additional enhanced funding for rural communities and we recognize that there is unique service delivery for rural communities” (CMSM 6). CMSMs considered child care operators as part of the broader child care community; they mentioned the importance of ensuring their voices are heard. For this reason, some rural child care directors/operators were included on planning committees that guided a more efficient delivery of programs to children and families. Some CMSMs indicated their continuous support for rural child care. Most CMSMs acknowledged that rural child care was in need of a major change and suggested maximizing space and disseminating information as ways of improving rural child care programs. One CMSM opined: “Child care programs need major change. We need to have candid discussions, especially on the use of school space . . . we need to keep everyone informed” (CMSM 3).

Many of the CMSMs reported a more comprehensive use of the schools in rural areas. Some CMSMs had established partnerships with local school boards that enabled access to low-cost spaces in schools for rural child care operators. Moreover, CMSMs encouraged nonprofit child care centres to offer before- and after-school (extended day) programs on behalf of schools because they believed it would increase centre viability, particularly for vulnerable centres. One CMSM mentioned partnering with the school board and undertaking feasibility studies with nonprofit rural centre operators about becoming third-party operators. CMSMs also reported that they were taking action to aid rural child care centres with issues related to staffing. CMSMs aided professional development for ECEs through access to career development courses. One CMSM gave an example of a professional development strategy funded by the Ministry of Education where ECEs and supervisors participated in a 30-credit-hours course that focused on child care practices. This course updated staff practice. The cost of tuition, as well as the cost for hiring replacement staff for the duration of the training, was covered.

Discussion

Funding was a key issue raised by centre directors/operators. Limited funds affected their centres’ viability. Furthermore, the impacts of decreased enrollments, particularly the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds, was another issue raised. Staffing issues, including challenges

attracting and retaining qualified staff, were another concern for child care directors/operators. Finally, directors/operators expressed concerns about strategies such as offering before- and after-school / extended day services. These issues are interrelated, potentially affecting both the sustainability and quality of child care services.

Rural child care directors/operators cited insufficient funding as one of the most pressing problems facing their child care centre in the last year. By contrast, CMSMs did not identify funding, as such, as a critical issue for rural child care centre directors/operators. The views expressed by the centre directors/operators in this study were similar to the opinions expressed by focus groups held in Waterloo region in 2011 and 2012 (Region of Waterloo Social Services, 2012). As reported in the region's *Early Learning and Child Care Service Plan 2012–2015*, (urban and rural) operators identified the top four challenges that could threaten their current and future viability. They included (a) insufficient funds for wage subsidies for current staff, (b) the cost of infant/toddler care, (c) insufficient per-diem rates, and (d) lack of wage subsidies for new staff. In addition, ELCC directors/operators expressed concern about the limited funding available for renovations and transformation of junior/senior kindergarten spaces to infant and toddler spaces due to uncertainty about the demand for these spaces (Region of Waterloo Social Services, 2012). Similarly, rural child care directors/operators in this study suggested that there was limited funding available to them and it was not easily accessible. Furthermore, centre directors/operators showed disapproval of the large amounts being doled out to the public school system compared to what is being invested in the child care sector. Several directors/operators advocated for community-based child care programs to be treated as full and equal partners in an ELCC system (i.e., an integral part of services for children to be funded by the Ministry of Education). One director summed it up in these words: "There should be more funding within the [child care] system. If child care is part of the Ministry of Education, it should be looked at as part of it, as a full part" (Director 1). Additionally, directors/operators were advocating for increased funding for younger children. This study conceptualizes child care directors/operators and their social or political climate within an ecological system wherein independent parts interact. Constraints on resources create barriers for adaptation to changes such as the implementation of FDK.

Both CMSMs and centre directors/operators cited declining enrollments as a key issue facing the rural child care sector, although some CMSMs opined that this may not be unique to rural areas. Centre directors/operators cited the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds to FDK programs as the major cause for drops in enrollment. CMSMs were also aware of enrollment issues facing rural child care centres and identified low enrollments in infant and toddler programs as the main enrollment challenge facing rural child care. Declining enrollments were shown to have a ripple effect: They affected work hours allocated to staff, which could result in the loss of qualified staff to better-paying jobs. The loss of qualified staff, in turn, has a huge impact on program quality. As Maher, Frestedt, and Grace (2008) point out, licensed child care centres in rural areas have a higher number of infants per adult, thereby reducing the quality of care the infants receive. Declining enrollments and fewer staff also affects funding and the viability of these rural child care programs. OMSSA (2011) explains that the loss of quality licensed child care is not beneficial to children's development, particularly in rural areas, where it has been shown that licensed child care is decreasing and the unlicensed child care sector is growing. Quality child care is also essential to impede a decline of the rural population. OMSSA (2011) explains that new families and businesses are less likely to be attracted to areas without quality child care. CMSMs and directors/operators agree that rural child care centres face staffing challenges. CMSMs are aware that maintaining qualified staff is a key issue facing rural child care because of low wages and transportation costs. With the introduction of FDK, rural child care centres are losing staff to school boards that can offer higher wages and better benefits. A national study of child care programs in Canada (*You Bet We Still Care!*) acknowledged this challenge faced by child care centres. The study reported that competition from the school system for qualified ECEs was more of an issue in Ontario than elsewhere across Canada (Flanagan, Beach, & Varmuza, 2013).

Furthermore, CMSMs were fully aware that unqualified staff were securing employment in some centres. Several child care centre directors/operators admitted that they seldom receive job applications from qualified ECEs and have had to hire individuals with passion but little training. Both CMSMs and centre directors/operators acknowledged that this is a Band-Aid solution. Similarly, the aforementioned Waterloo Region's ELCC service plan reported that child care operators listed the lack of registered ECE graduates as one of the large challenges facing their centres. Centre operators who participated in focus groups in the Waterloo region and in the interviews conducted for this study were frustrated that they were losing qualified staff to school boards who could offer better wages and benefits (Region of Waterloo Social Services, 2012). Likewise, the national *You Bet We Still Care!* study reported that centre directors/operators across Canada are experiencing similar recruitment challenges: 65% reported a lack of qualified applicants for positions, and almost 43% stated that staff were not satisfied with their wages (Flanagan et al., 2013). In response to the lack of qualified applicants, 62.6 % of centre directors/operators reported hiring a less-qualified applicant (Flanagan et al., 2013).

In the presence of these challenges, however, centre directors/operators were not passive recipients of their environment. Findings situate centre directors/operators in the ecological framework as they adapt to changes in their environments with varying capacities.

Some of them reported promoting the value of licensed, quality child care in their local communities, both as a way of advertising their services and as a means of raising the profile of the ECE field. In a number of cases, these practices were encouraged by CMSMs, and that prompted directors/operators to develop marketing as a business strategy to remain viable. This was a dominant theme among centre directors/operators, many of whom explained that in this period of transition, they have had to create awareness of the licensed child care sector more than ever. Centre directors/operators utilized different media, such as television, community newspapers and magazines, post boards, and word of mouth. Besides marketing, CMSMs noticed that some rural child care centres were reducing their fees to remain competitive with the informal child care sector. Centre directors/operators reported the opposite, although it was a minor theme. Some child care centre directors/operators were increasing parent fees to maintain their centres and their capacity to attract and retain qualified staff. Clearly, without additional public funding, the trade-offs between charging parents higher fees versus maintaining staff salaries in a time of transition and uncertainty are very difficult. Nonetheless, there are growing concerns that both the limited number of infant/toddler spaces and increased parent fees to cover higher costs could put enormous pressure on parents by making child care even more unaffordable for them (Friendly, 2011). CMSMs noticed that parents often resort to informal care; increasing parent fees may push some parents to the informal child care sector.

The report *With Our Best Future in Mind* identified the various roles of municipalities in the introduction of FDK, including service planning to ensure high-quality service provision and support for child care services and school boards during the period of significant system change (Pascal, 2009). CMSMs are expected to work with school boards to develop plans for FDK implementation. Similarly, CMSMs are charged with managing and resourcing Best Start Child and Family Centres to provide comprehensive programs and supports to children and families, ranging from prenatal supports, to nutrition counselling, to early learning and care, to early intervention and care (Pascal, 2009). Furthermore, municipalities are responsible for ensuring the flow of funds to school boards and Best Start Child and Family Centres. Finally, CMSMs are expected to retain responsibility for integrating programs and evaluating them (Pascal, 2009). The roles outlined in the Pascal report were articulated by CMSMs in this study, most of whom mentioned taking on broader responsibilities, developing partnerships with school boards, and supporting service providers to adapt to a different system. Most CMSMs interviewed in this study indicated that recent changes in responsibilities had increased the complexity of their work and added to their workload. Supporting rural child care operators is thus only one facet of their increasingly complex roles.

Specific to child care, one of the roles of municipalities includes helping child care operators merge with public schools. CMSMs can provide transitional funding and capital funding that will be used to restructure buildings and transform spaces. The Pascal report cites an example where a school that has a child care centre, a parenting and family literacy centre, or an Ontario Early Years Centre, all colocated within it, would merge into a Best Start Child and Family Centre, providing one-stop access for children and families. Findings from the present study showed that while centre directors/operators were cognizant of the benefits of this consolidation, it raised complex and difficult issues in rural settings. For example, colocating with a school was not seen as an ideal fit for some centre directors/operators, who felt that the setting would not be ideal for running a child care centre due to location, ages of children, or other factors; for that reason a stand-alone centre was preferred. Some operators of stand-alone centres were fortunate to receive funding to restructure their buildings, while others were still waiting and hoping. Privately operated (for-profit) centres reported not being able to access such resources. Original plans that envisioned additional funds to allow Best Start Child and Family Centres serving younger children to attract and retain qualified staff had not materialized. There had been little policy development and limited new funding to support the development and viability of centres that serve more children younger than 4. Findings from this study show that rural child care centres have had difficulty attracting qualified ECEs to begin with, and those who had intentions of raising staff wages lacked sufficient funding to match what was being offered by the school board. The bottom line for centre directors/operators was that more funding was required.

Child care centre directors/operators proclaimed that they are not baby sitters; they are a part of the early childhood education and care system, which the Ministry of Education is responsible for, and should be treated as such. Supporting this claim is an explanation from the OECD (as cited by Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, 2011) that care and education are inseparable terms and that quality services for children provide both. Child care directors/operators explained that the objectives of FDK were already in place in high-quality licensed centres; they had been offering an integrated program of learning and play and did not see the need for the implementation of FDK. Several directors/operators felt that funds directed toward the school boards to implement FDK would have been better spent on the child care sector. Some directors/operators talked about rebranding their centre names to include an early learning component, while others discussed enlightening the community about their early learning and care programs. These directors/operators were sensitive to perceptions that child care is associated with just supervision of children, rather than being seen as a well-designed program that offers developmentally appropriate learning experiences, rendering it less of a priority to the Ministry of Education.

While the majority of centre directors/operators expressed concerns about the impacts of FDK implementation, some centre directors/operators seemed more optimistic and expressed less concern about it. It is important to note that, because FDK had not yet been fully implemented in a number of areas where study child care centres were located, some had an advantage by having more time to plan. Having established that, some centre directors/operators who had not yet been directly impacted by the introduction of FDK still expressed concern about the impending challenges they saw ahead. Responses from some of these directors/operators indicated that they were taking a proactive approach to dealing with anticipated issues, including planning for the replacement of children who would be lost to FDK upon implementation. Others had started promoting their centres and emphasizing the importance of licensed child care in the community. Furthermore, several directors/operators took business resilience courses offered by the CMSM or recruited board members with financial expertise. They mentioned drawing up budgets and strategically planning ahead. Another similarity among those directors/operators who had fewer concerns was that they all had considerable support from their CMSMs. Some directors/operators also acknowledged being more fortunate than other centres when it came to attracting funding from the municipality.

There were also some centre directors/operators who reported not being concerned about staffing challenges. These directors/operators offered some sort of benefit package to their staff and were trying to stay competitive by increasing staff wages. To some directors/operators, loyalty was important and they strove to show appreciation to their staff. These directors/operators mentioned having lower staff turnover compared to other centres. One of the directors/operators mentioned that the majority of the staff who had worked in that centre had been there for 10 to 15 years. These directors/operators also mentioned investing in professional development and training for their staff. All centre directors/operators who reported fewer staffing challenges also reported improving their staff wages and offering good working conditions to staff. Not all of them offered benefits, but there were plans in place for this. Knowledge about these strategies is helpful in understanding ways to retain staff.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by this research, the child care sector has been hugely impacted by the implementation of FDK in Ontario. This study pays particular attention to the rural child care sector, which already had a struggling child care system. Centre directors/operators in this study call for equal treatment of kindergarten programs and licensed child care services. The challenges of sustaining high-quality, inclusive child care in rural areas remains an understudied area. However, it is a critically important service for rural communities, and it requires careful examination and responsive, flexible support from policy makers and service managers, as well as equitable financial supports from governments.

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