

Summary

Quality Counts! Assessing the Quality of Daycare Services
Based on the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development
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The network of daycare services in Quebec has seen significant expansion since 1997 and the government's adoption of its policy on reduced-contribution daycare services. The number of places in regulated daycare rose from a little over 78,000 in 1997 to over 190,000 in June 2005.

One of the objectives of this policy is to improve equality of opportunity by providing all Quebec children access to a daycare environment that enhances their social and cognitive development. This report provides a unique perspective on whether that objective is being met. After reviewing the comprehensive family policy adopted by Quebec in 1997, Japel, Tremblay and Côté present the results of a study undertaken to evaluate the quality of services offered in more than 1,500 daycare settings and the quality of services received by children according to their socio-economic status.

The evaluation was conducted within the framework of the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD), which annually surveys a cohort of 2,223 children representative of children born in Quebec in 1997-98. The observations were carried out each year from summer 2000, when the children were age two and one-half, until 2003, when they started kindergarten. In all, more than 1,500 daycare settings were evaluated and just over 900 children were observed at least once in their daycare setting.

The quality of the services was evaluated based on the scales used in numerous studies in North America and Europe and whose validity and reliability are well established. These scales, with their wide range of criteria, provide a means to measure the quality of the interaction between staff and children; educational activities; children's health and safety arrangements; the furnishings and spatial arrangement; program structure; and provisions for the role of parents and staff working conditions.

The results of the evaluation show that:

- The majority of the daycare settings (61 percent) that were rated met the criteria for minimal quality, that is, they ensured the health and safety of children, but their educational component was minimal.
- Among the daycare settings rated, 12 percent were of inadequate quality.
- One-quarter of the daycare settings (27 percent) provided services whose quality was good, very good or excellent, that is, they offered services appropriate to the children's stage of development and constituted a stimulating and educational environment.
- In all types of daycare settings, the quality of the communication and the interactions between staff and children were the greatest strength. However, the quality of the educational activities and hygiene provisions were especially problematic.

- The early childhood centres (*centres de la petite enfance*, or CPEs) generally offered better quality service than the other types of setting. Thus, 35 percent of centre-based CPEs and 29 percent of home-based CPEs, versus only 14 percent of for-profit daycares and 10 percent of unregulated home-based daycares, were rated as good quality.
 - Conversely, 27 percent of for-profit daycares and 26 percent of unregulated home-based settings, versus 6 percent of centre-based CPEs and 7 percent of home-based CPEs, were inadequate in terms of quality. Using information collected on parents' income, education and employment status, the authors also observe that:
 - The children who attended daycare were generally from more privileged backgrounds than the children who did not.
 - The overall quality of the daycare settings attended by children from less privileged families was significantly lower than that of those attended by children from more privileged families.
 - Children from less privileged families were more likely to attend a daycare of inadequate quality. One in five daycares attended by these children was considered inadequate in terms of quality, in contrast to less than one in ten for children of better-off families.
 - Nonetheless, in centre-based CPEs the children received services that were on average of the same quality, irrespective of the socio-economic status of the families using them.
 - In contrast, the home-based CPEs, for-profit daycares and unregulated home-based daycares attended by less well-off families were of lower quality than the daycare settings of the same type used by better-off families.
- On the basis of these results, the authors make several recommendations for improving the quality of daycare services and reducing the socio-economic disparities they observed. In particular, they call for:
- Improvements in the training of early childhood educators, since staff members are the key factor in daycare quality, notably with regard to the frequency and variety of educational activities and to health and safety measures.
 - A re-examination of the regulations on educator-child ratios and the minimum interior and exterior space required per child, given that the current requirements in Quebec correspond to a minimal level of quality and are unlikely to ensure the implementation of educational programs based on individualized learning.
 - Expansion of the network of centre-based CPEs in low-income neighbourhoods and for certain targeted interventions. The authors conclude that a universal approach that does not outline specific measures to reduce socio-economic disparities may in the end aggravate them.