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Monitoring quality in early childhood education programs:

A bunch of W's and one H

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Increasing numbers of young children are being cared for and educated outside of their homes. Ontario's early learning agenda is dramatically changing the early childhood education and care (ECEC) landscape. Over the next few years Junior and Senior Kindergarten programs, which are currently half-day programs, will become full day programs. As public spending and children's exposure to these programs increase, it is essential that we monitor the quality of services children receive.

Having a strategy for monitoring the quality of programs is part of the blueprint outlined by Charles Pascal in "With our Best Future in Mind". This Q & A briefly addresses key questions about what such a monitoring system should look like.

Why should we assess quality in early childhood education programs?

I see three primary goals in assessing quality in ECEC programs:

- *Quality improvement.* Quality measures provide useful feedback to staff and teachers that can be used to inform and improve their practice.
- *Accountability.* Quality measures provide objective information about services. This information allows for informed policy making as programs are refined and resource allocation decisions are made.
- *Public education.* Quality measures provide parents with information about programs they may be considering for their children.

What should we look for when assessing program quality?

There is a very large body of research that speaks to what makes for good quality early childhood education and care programs. The general consensus is that good quality ECEC programs are ones that:

- Provide children with warm and nurturing environments.
- Provide children with access to activities and materials that they can interact with and that have been selected by educators to further specific educational goals.
- Provide children with useful and supportive feedback about their own performance.
- Meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds who have different learning needs.
- Facilitate the connection between home and the early childhood education program.
- Provide good adult:child ratios with low staff turnover.
- Have experienced staff with early childhood education backgrounds.

Who should be assessed?

The same quality standards should apply regardless of the context in which the ECEC program is set. A four-year-old child has the same developmental needs whether she is in a school based program, child care centre, nursery school, etc. We need to break down silos based on precedent and logistics. All types of ECEC programs need to be assessed using the same standards.

How should we monitor ECEC program quality?

- *Fairly.* In order for assessments to be fair the measures must be *valid* (i.e., they must measure what they claim to measure) and

reliable (i.e., they must be applied consistently across assessors, programs and time).

- *Objectively*. In order to avoid self-presentation biases in self-reported (i.e., survey) measures, assessments need to include an observational component. The observers conducting the assessments must be third parties who are independent of the ECEC program. Another advantage of observational measures is that they are likely to generate useful feedback for quality improvement purposes.
- *Efficiently*. In our resource constrained reality we need to balance the costs of conducting assessments with funds available for investing in the ECEC programs themselves. Given that assessments can be expensive we need to find efficient ways to get information about program quality. For example, childcare licensing specialists could collect information beyond what they currently collect. Even small incremental investment in the information gathered could be very useful in monitoring program quality.

Which measures should we use?

Several existing measures of quality meet the criteria listed above. One promising measure is the Operating Criteria (OC), a “homegrown” observational measure developed in Toronto. The OC is a comprehensive measure that meets the validity and reliability standards mentioned above. Other measures include the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which provides very rich quality assessments but is much more labour intensive than the OC. The Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) captures the emotional tone of staff’s interactions with children. It would augment the OC nicely as it requires very little time beyond the observations required for the OC.

When and where should ECEC quality monitoring assessments be conducted?

- Quality monitoring needs to happen on an ongoing basis. It is necessary to balance cost, fairness and quality of feedback in deciding on an assessment schedule. Different localities have tried different lag times between assessments. While annual assessments are fairly common they may be too costly to sustain over time. Decisions about assessment schedules should be tested as currently there is

little empirical basis for making these decisions.

- Assessments must be conducted in individual classrooms within programs. Additional research is needed to determine whether all classrooms need to be assessed, or whether it is possible to focus on a subset of classrooms in any one assessment cycle.

What-else do we need to examine in order to monitor ECEC quality?

One key goal of ECEC programs is to support the development of the children served in these programs. To evaluate the success of ECEC programs we also need to assess how the children served by the programs are doing concurrently and over time. This requires assessment of child outcomes. Many well developed tools are available for such assessments including the Early Development Inventory which is another “homegrown” measure that has gained in popularity. Any effort to evaluate Ontario’s early learning initiative should include such assessments.

In conclusion, monitoring program quality is critical. Two major barriers to the implementation of a monitoring system are the *cost* and *culture*. Cost is always a factor and should be minimized without compromising the utility of the quality ratings that are generated. It is important to keep in mind that in the face of current and projected investments in ECEC programs, the cost of monitoring programs is minute. A culture of openness, support and accountability must be established in order for professionals to embrace a monitoring system. Establishing such a culture as Ontario undergoes dramatic change in our ECEC landscape is both promising and imperative.

Much is known about the various “W’s” (and the one “H”) of monitoring quality in ECEC programs. However, there are significant gaps in our knowledge of how to monitor quality fairly and efficiently. These gaps highlight the need for more research in this area.

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